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The Fire Trail

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—A ROMANCE OF THE ARIZONA BAD
LANDS IN THE BRAVE DAYS OF THE GOLD SEEKERS
AND THE GUN FIGHTERS

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"FROM now on I enjoy my life!" The speaker was a tall youth, violently burned, rangy, powerful, and with twinkling brown eyes. "One more drink. What do you say, pard?"

"I thought you said you only had a mouthful of water in that flask of yours," the other derelict retorted.

Ned Hardy's brown eyes still had a twinkle left.

"I said I was going to enjoy the rest of my life," he managed to say.

"Which I predict will come to an end at four o'clock this afternoon," added the pessimistic Rufe Carson.

Carson watched his young partner toss off the last of his flask. The sight worked grim havoc with the determination to hang on to his own last drink. He was like Tantalus in hell, with the water receding from his lips. He could bear it no longer. The alkaline silt over which they had been trail-

ing had mounted in salty clouds from their horses' feet, as if it were steam scalding their mouths. Carson drained his flask. The two men felt that they had drunk their parting toast to life.

Almost immediately—it could scarcely be said that it was a mere coincidence—a black speck appeared in the blazing white dome of the sky above them.

"Well, he's flying good and high, anyway," the younger of the two wanderers said, his crow's-feet deepening as he squinted upward.

"They fly low only when they've spotted a dying coyote or steer," Carson rejoined. "That buzzard will be wheeling down low enough about four this aft."

They pressed on doggedly over the dunes, the heat beating back fiercely from glittering sand, vibrating through red mist, burning their lips, blinding their eyes. They came to a lone cactus tree that stood up

like the mast of a wrecked ship, with spars askew—the only break in the landscape. Rufe Carson dropped from his horse and staggered toward the tree with bowie knife in hand. He cut out a cup-shaped hole in the trunk, and waited for it to fill with sap.

He had saved a burro's life that way once; but there was no sap in this tree. It was like cork.

He turned around with a blank and tragic stare that sent a shudder through his partner. His face was a white mask, with the eyebrows making a single black line, knotted in the middle.

The buzzard came down, so that they could see it plainly now, sailing in wide circles.

Rufus Carson drew his six-gun.

"What are you going to do, pard?" the other cried.

"Kill that horse of mine," Carson said thickly.

"Are you daft?"

"He's got water in his belly; but *you* won't get any. Kill your own!"

Ned Hardy leaped from his saddle and hurled himself upon the frenzied man. Rufe's six-shooter barked out. The pinto lurched convulsively as a slug zipped between its ears, cutting away a tuft of the forelock. The little horse galloped off unhurt, then wheeled about and stood eying its master in dumb terror.

"For hell's sake put that gun back and buck up!" the younger prospector said. "Hang on till we get over to that mesa. There's shade there."

"Tain't shade. It's a mirage."

Both the men knew this. A landslide on the mesa cliffs had denuded great spaces of lignite and slate, producing the exact semblance of cool, life-giving shadow.

Ned held his horse so that it cast a bit of shade over his partner; but the heat from the quartz and glittering sand, as Carson sank to the ground, was redoubled in fury. The stricken man's head fell back, and his glazed eyes stared upward at the bird wheeling against the blinding steel dome overhead.

"Get me some water, pard!" he gasped.

"We've got to keep on trailing for the Big Mesas," replied Hardy. "There's a ghost town there, with a good water pocket."

"How much trail?"

"Two days."

"Pard, I'm through!"

Ned Hardy brought back the frightened pinto, then tried to lift Carson to the saddle. The latter was a dead weight. Once in the saddle, he rolled off heavily like a drunken man, and lay with mouth agape, his lips buried in the hot sand.

Ned stood up, baffled and tortured. He had a grim desire to meet death standing up, or else riding. His head throbbed and burned as if it were the hottest point in that flaming landscape. Circles of heat seemed to radiate from it. The crow's-feet about his glazed eyes turned suddenly into the wrinkles of an old man.

The heat wavering over the sand created a strange undulation of colors, so that Hardy felt as if he were on an island in the midst of a rippling sea. The mesa off there to the west mounted like a crimson Gibraltar, its base buried in a sea of shimmering light.

Gibraltar is not precisely the term. It was a mesa lacking in substance, formed only of a splash of color, the edges of which wavered. There seemed to be no reality about that enchanted mountain or anything else in the hideous universe, except the one black thing hovering above; and even that alien touch harmonized in the eternal shifting and gyrating of the world. As Ned Hardy saw it describing its narrowing circles, it made him dizzy. He reached out with widespread hands clutching the empty air for support, and then fell.

Immediately, upon contact with the hot sand, he knew that he must fight desperately and frantically to arise. To lie there, even for a moment, would mean that he had given up fighting. He refused to accept the obvious fact that the fight was over. The desert-broken bones knew it. The buzzard knew it. The only one who did not know he was beaten was Ned himself.

He stumbled after his pinto, which stood, panting and tortured, its feet spread apart, like a sick horse trying to stand, its head hanging low, its yellow teeth bared.

And then Ned Hardy thought of his partner.

Carson was not, properly speaking, a partner. The two had cast in their lots together at a saloon town on the desert's edge, both being educated men and bent on the same quest—the hunt for surface float. Nevertheless, when two men start out for the Soda Mesa Desert together, the unwritten law is that they must stick together like brothers.

Ned Hardy staggered back, peering half blindly at the dunes, until he saw Carson lying on the sand, almost as shapeless as a scarecrow that has been tossed upon a rubbish heap.

"Come on, pard! I'm going to help you get to the ghost town. Plenty of water there, cold and clear—regular champagne, and no one to drink it. Just ripples into a clay basin where it's caught and held, for us to douse our faces in."

A groan from the tortured man responded to each vivid sentence.

"I'll bring you your horse," added Ned.

He staggered off again, stumbling in the glittering silt, pulling himself up, changing his direction, staggering back. He was like something caught in a trap.

He saw what he thought was Carson's pinto within an arm's length or two. It took him an eternity to stagger that distance. He was like a man drugged heavily with hasheesh, so that all sense of time was gone. It took him perhaps five steps to reach the horse, but at each step he seemed to relive his whole life.

When he got there, he fell to his knees and reached up with both arms, clutching at the beast's hide—like a man in a storm clutching at a rock. The hide was moist, and this confused him. He had noticed that neither of the plugs had been able to sweat—a circumstance which made it a certainty that they could not cover the long trail to the ghost town.

Another thing that confused Ned was this—by some miracle or other his partner had strength enough to mount; for there he was hunched up, strangely misshapen and small, sitting in the saddle!

Ned peered up at the grotesque thing that had once been the stalwart and handsome Rufe Carson. What a change had come over him! The desert might age a man in two or three weeks. It might make him seem ten years older; but here was a very old man. His face was crosshatched with deep wrinkles. The straight black eyebrows that cut across his face had turned white, and so had his black hair.

Well, that might be possible. Probably the alkali had powdered horse and man until both seemed made of white stone.

"You think you can make it, pard?" Ned cried chokingly. "I'll fight, if you will! Come on!"

"Wait a minute thar! Where you staggerin' to?"

Rufe's voice was certainly changed. Ned looked back, dumfounded at the difference. What a crackling, piping old voice! He had a sudden conviction that his partner had drained his last reserve of energy to get up on his horse, and that it had left him the mere shell of a human being.

"Are you sure you can make it, pard?" he asked dubiously.

"Make what?"

"Mule Town."

"I'm trailin' to Chloride, not to Mule Town; and it don't look to me like you two *hombres* can trail nowhere!"

"Two *hombres*!" Ned gasped. "What's come over you, pard? The sun's got you."

The strange little man up there on that lathered horse dismounted. As he stood before Ned Hardy, he came only to the young prospector's shoulder.

"Is that *hombre* over thar kicked off yet?"

"Over where?" Ned looked to the sand dune where he saw the same shapeless scarecrow lying as if it had been tossed away by the wind. "Look here!" He turned upon the wizened, gray-haired fellow, who was busy unpacking something from another horse. "Who are you, stranger?" he asked.

"Joe Pazy's my name, if that's what you want to know. I seen that thar buzzard wheelin' up high all day—high enough so's I figured it was a man that was dyin'. Then I trailed over here and seen you goin' around in circles till you grabbed a holt onto my horse. Now take a drink and come to!"

"A what?"

"A drink. Your pard over thar needs a little sip, too, I reckon, and likewise your poor ole plugs. Never seen such a thirsty-lookin' outfit of hosses and men in all my days! Here's plenty of water for all of you—not gyp water, neither, but good, clean, sweet water. See them five-gallon cans on my mules? Water! Filled up to the brim with it!" He chuckled. "That's it! Now the light's comin' into your eyes!"

As soon as Ned Hardy knew what had happened, he reeled off, shouting like a drunken man. He ran, staggering, toward his partner, and held a canteen to Rufe's lips.

II

THEY saved Rufe Carson's life by stretching a wet poncho before him, so

that the wind blowing through it was cooled. Within half an hour after sunset the fierce heat of the day turned into the thin, bracing air of night. There is no twilight or gloaming in the Soda Mesa Desert. It is either murderous daytime or cool, delightful night.

After he had slept until midnight, Carson was able to stay in his saddle, and the old mucker who had saved the two prospectors from death advised hitting the trail immediately. They could thus make use of the six hours before dawn; and the outfit was now well equipped for the two days' journey to Mule Town. Besides the three saddle horses, the old mucker who had joined them had two pack mules, with plenty of provisions.

"I'm goin' along with you," he announced. "With my two pack mules, and my grubstake and water, we kin make Mule Town without no more disagreeable adventures to any of us."

"I thought you said you were heading for Chloride," Ned Hardy objected.

"Yes, but I've changed my mind!"

"That's a good heap of trail out of your way."

"Just the same, I'm ridin' with you."

"But look here, Mr. Good Samaritan!" Ned returned. "We can't allow that. You've done your duty—saved our lives, watered our plugs, fed us. Now it's up to us to shift for ourselves. Some day we'll repay you for what you've done, but we can't accept any more."

"All the same, I'm goin' along with you," the old fellow said firmly. "I'm advisin' we waste no more time palaverin'."

They covered a lot of trail that night. When morning came, the two young men were fairly well recovered from the terrific grueling of the preceding day, but neither had strength enough to ride under the heat of the sun.

"It's all right," the old mucker said agreeably. "I ain't in no hurry to git back to Chloride. We'll just hide up thar in that *barranco*, where most of the day we'll have shade. Then, later on, we'll eat up some more trail."

The two young prospectors slept during those burning hours; but Ned Hardy noticed that whenever he awoke, the old man was sitting watching over them, oiling his gun, peering up into the desolate reaches of the gulch, and then down toward its mouth, exactly like a shaggy dog standing guard.

Later in the day they had a good meal from their benefactor's grubstake. Ned started gathering sage sticks for a fire. He had not done this before, for the very thought of a fire in that dreadful heat was abhorrent. Cold beans, prunes, and whisky had been their fare; but now, for the first time, Ned desired coffee.

Old Pазzy stopped opening a can of beans when he saw what Ned was doing.

"Don't build no fire now, pard," he said.

"I'm fixin' up a cold supper. That's all you and him will be wantin'."

"How about some coffee?"

"Ain't got any coffee."

"Flapjacks, then?"

"Ain't got any flour."

"Some hot beans will do my pard good. He needs a hot meal to get back some strength."

Pазzy shook his grizzled head.

"You ain't never seen a man saved from the fires of that thar alkaline desert afore I saved you two!"

"Can't say I have, but—"

"Well, then, don't light a fire. Men saved from Sody Mesa Desert cain't abide a fire. It's a peculiar kind of alkali—works on 'em like rabies on a dog. Just the very sight of a flame makes 'em froth, same's a mad dog smellin' water."

"Never heard of it."

"Don't light a fire, Ned."

It was Rufe Carson who said this. Rufe was emaciated, gray-faced, broken in spirit. It was conceivable that the effects of his set-to with that burning sun would not wear off for a long time—perhaps for a year, perhaps for the rest of his life.

Ned Hardy was incredulous. He recalled that he himself had been in delirium during the last stages of his thirst, but now he was raging hungry for a good hot meal. He did not go against the desires of his two companions, however. They fell to their cold meal, ate in silence, and then prepared to hit the trail again.

While old Pазzy was cinching the saw-buck saddles on his mules, Rufe Carson drew his partner aside.

"Look here, Hardy!" he said. "We've got to get rid of this bird."

"Get rid of him?" the other inquired. "What do you mean by that? Isn't he going a three days' journey out of his way to help us?"

"Not by a long shot! He's a leech, and he's attached himself to us. He'll stay with

us till we get to Mule Town, and then he'll stay with us some more—mark my words. Let's ditch him right here and now!"

"You're crazy! Ditch him, after he saved our lives? If he wants to stick by me, he can do it—for the rest of his life. Anything he asks for he gets."

"I'm advising you, pard—ditch him. We're in for some trouble if we don't. Did you get that stuff about not lighting a fire?"

"I thought *you* objected as much as he did."

Carson laughed.

"I'd give anything for some hot coffee. He's sagebrushing us, I tell you."

He checked himself as the little mucker turned toward them, glaring under his bushy gray brows, like a suspicious terrier.

"You ready, gents?"

"I'll ditch him," Carson said. He went over to the gnarled, toothless little fellow. "Look here, pard," he began. "I've been talking over my plans with Hardy, and we've decided something. You helped us out, giving us your grub and your water, and we owe you everything. Can't pay you now, but we will when we get enough to pay you. If we discover a lode, you deserve half; but right now we're advising you not to bank on us."

"Bank on you for what?"

"For paying you back."

"I ain't ast you to pay me back. Wouldn't any mucker seein' two boys dyin' in the desert do what I done?"

"Any one who's as white as you—yes; but we think you're going too far."

"Just because I'm seein' you safe to Mule Town?"

"Well, that's where our decision comes in. We aren't going to Mule Town."

"What and the hell?"

"We've decided to head south to the Bar-L-Bar."

"I'll go with you. You'll need my grub," old Pazy said readily.

"We don't need it. We know a sutler down below Borax Mountain, who'll fix us up with food and water."

"It 'll take you another day to git to Borax Mountain. I'll stay with you till then."

Carson swore in exasperation. What more could he tell the fellow? It was quite obvious that old Pazy had attached himself. The veteran's eyes gleamed under his thick gray brows.

"You're givin' me the sack, if I know anything!" he burst out suddenly.

Ned Hardy stepped into the conversation at this point.

"We aren't giving you the sack, pard," he said. "If you want to go along with us, you're welcome. If you want to be our pard from now on, we accept. We owe you our lives. Anything you say goes; so let's mount and hit the trail."

The nearest water was at Mule Town, and they continued on the trail that led in that direction, traversing a wide area of bad lands, arroyas, and dry stream beds. Old Pazy took the lead, urging his horse at its best pace, with the mules loping along behind, and the two young prospectors bringing up the rear with their tired horses. Whenever they fell too far behind, Pazy reined in, waited for them, and then set the pace again—as fast a pace as they would follow.

The same peculiar scene was reenacted at their next camping place. Pazy chose a secluded gulch, and they had a meal, but no fire. The two younger men slept heavily. The old mucker remained on watch, his furtive eyes glancing up the gulch, then down, then to its rocky walls, watching every boulder, every cactus tree.

When Rufe Carson awoke, he saw that the old man had climbed the cañon wall to the rim, and was standing there, shading his eyes against the sun. Carson watched the old fellow for a few minutes, and then something happened that convinced him of the truth.

Old Pazy suddenly turned and leaped down from the gulch rim, sliding down a dry watercourse in a shower of sand and stones. He came racing across the stream bed to where they had camped.

Carson awoke his partner.

"I knew it all along," he said. "We've let that old leech stick on till it's too late, and now we've got a gun fight on our hands!"

Ned Hardy, shaken from fathoms of slumber, stood up and gazed blankly at the grotesque little gnome of a man hurtling down the bank toward them.

Rufe Carson jumped to his feet with an oath.

"We should have called a show-down with the old coot when he objected to a fire. That proved plain enough that he was being trailed! How do we know it's not a posse? We'll all three of us get the hemp!"

Old Pazy reached them, his terrier eyes gleaming with fear, his hands shaking.

"Gents, I got to confess. They're comin'—a band of hell-bent renegades, which they're goin' to murder me! Please, gents, I beg you, forgive me; but you're big and young and strong, and I'm a weak, scairt ole man! Look at my hand! Think I kin shoot anything with that hand? Please, gents—"

"Tell us about it quick, *hombre*," Carson ordered, "and stop your whimpering."

"They been trailin' me for days. I shook 'em off, travelin' on silt, where my horse and mules wouldn't leave no tracks; but I know'd well enough they'd pick up the trail again when I hit the crusted sand. Help me, pards! Don't forsake me! They'll shoot me down like a dog. They'll shoot any man for the fun of seein' him croak. There's a couple of half-breed Apaches and some *chulo* gunmen, and two whites who'd torture a man for sport. I tell you, gents, you got to help me, if they's a spark of manhood in you!"

"I thought so!" Carson sneered. His face was white with anger, his lowered eyebrows making a straight, vicious line across the pallid mask. "You said you'd help us get to Mule Town just because you're a good Samaritan! That's a fine way to trick two unsuspecting strangers! We ought to bump you off right here and now, and save these outlaws the trouble!"

Pazy had fallen to his knees, his root-like fingers intertwined and shaking as if with palsy.

"You don't mean you're goin' to forsake me now, gents? You can't mean that—after the way I saved your lives!"

"That's not the way to make a bargain, *hombre*. You gave us water, and then named the price when you got good and ready. If you'd named the price first, we'd have agreed; but not now."

Ned Hardy, however, seemed to take a different view of the matter. The younger prospector reached out to the terror-stricken old man and helped him to his feet.

"How many are there, pard?" he asked.

"Eight or nine, I reckon," replied Pazy. "I seen four riders headin' for the mouth of the gulch, and they's a bunch closin' in on the upper end. They must 'a' trailed us right here, and then spread out for to attack us. They's no hope, gents, unless you help me!"

"All right, pard—calm down," Ned Hardy said gently. "You and I can fight 'em. You picked out a good camping place." He turned to his other companion and added: "Carson, if there's only ten half-breeds with dirty guns surrounding us, it don't look as if we need your help."

Rufe Carson laughed. He buckled on his holster and cartridge belt, saddled his horse, and mounted.

"I don't figure those words will hurt my feelings any, pard," he said genially. "The quarrel isn't between you and me; but if you want to side with that old mucker against ten men, all right. I'm not hankering to commit suicide; so while the fight goes on, I stay out. Then, if you come to your senses—"

The sound of horses' hoofs beating upon the rock slabs of the gulch bed struck in sharply upon Carson's last sentence. He swung up to his saddle, turned his mount, and headed down, to meet the attackers in his own way.

Meanwhile old Pazy fumbled frantically in his pack for a shotgun. He examined the gun and his revolver, and satisfied himself that both were loaded. Then he took the animals to a side draw, where they were hidden behind thick chaparral. Returning to Ned Hardy, he took his post behind a big boulder which protected him from the fire of any attack from the upper end of the gulch.

Hardy crouched behind a rock in the stream bed, from which point he could cover the advance of the renegades coming up the narrow gorge.

III

RUFE CARSON rode down the gorge until he came within sight of the four renegades who were pressing the attack from that point. Then he held up his hands.

The four reined in, apparently surprised at this gesture. While still well out of range, one of them shouted:

"Git down from that nag, *hombre*—and on the near side!"

Carson obeyed.

"Now hang your gun and holster on the saddle horn and come over here!"

Carson obeyed again. As he marched toward them across the boulder wash, he was glad that he had not stayed in that fight. They looked as fierce a quartet of loboes as he had ever seen in the desert.

The spokesman was a gaunt scarecrow

of a man with a lean, unshaven jaw, and hungry, fevered-looking eyes. Behind him was a chunky fellow with a red beard knotted under a bulldog chin. Two half-breeds with Mexican sombreros and shoulder holsters, mounted on patchy, sore-backed plugs, rode out and met the advancing man.

They searched him for a possible hidden gun, took his bowie knife and canteen, and then rode over to his horse and appropriated it—saddle, bridle, canteen, six-gun, and all.

Carson had visions of being forced to trail it to Mule Town on foot, or of being shot down like a dog. However, he had no other course but to carry out his original plan.

"I know what you want, men, and you can have it," he said.

"You know what we want—and you ain't fightin'?" the gaunt scarecrow asked, the announcement seeming to puzzle him.

"I know enough not to get into a fight when it's none of my business."

"What do you mean by that, *hombre*? Wasn't you with old Pazy up thar in the gulch?"

"I don't know old Pazy. He picked us up on the alkaline plains back there, and stuck to us like a leech. He wanted us to fight for him."

"They was three of you altogether," remarked the spokesman.

"The other *hombre* was my pard. He's fool enough to stay in the fight, though I tried to argue him out of it. He don't know when he's licked."

This seemed to please the four renegades. They bared their broken, yellow teeth and winked at one another.

"Better shoot thees *hombre*," one of the half-breeds advised.

"Shoot me?" Carson cried. "I'm going on my way. I don't know what this fight's about. Give me my horse, and I'll hit the trail."

"You say you don't know what it's about?" the hawk-nosed spokesman said. He stroked his black, thin chin for a moment, and nodded his head. "That explains it, then," he added. "If you'd knowed what the fight's about, you'd 'a' stuck in."

"Give me my horse, and I'll go."

The renegade chuckled.

"That thar ain't a very brilliant remark, *hombre*. Cain't you see we need hosses? Look at these cayuses of ourn,

ready to fall apart any minute. You don't seem to know who I am. Idaho's my name—Chief Idaho. This here's my pard." He pointed to the bull-necked, red-whiskered man. "Crummit's his name—Bill Crummit. We don't shoot down nobody without findin' out, first, if it ain't more convenient to leave him live."

"It 'll be more convenient, gents," Rufe Carson protested quickly. "Anything I can do—"

"We'll make a dicker with you. This here gulch that Pazy chose to hide in is a ticklish place for to attack. It might be wiser for us to besiege those two unfortunate coots in thar. Then, again, besiegin' takes time; and we bein' birds of passage, as you might say, cain't hardly afford to just set here and wait."

"Them two won't last long in that gulch without they have plenty of grub and water," suggested the chief's henchman, Bill Crummit.

"That's just it!" said the hawk-nosed Idaho. "What you kin tell us, *hombre*," he said, addressing his prisoner, "is just how much food and water they-all got. When you answer, be kind of sharp in your estimatin', too; because, if you lie, we'll come back to you after the gun fight and ax you to explain same."

"You won't find me lying, gents," Carson said readily. "I'm through with them both. My pard's shown himself to be a harebrained ass, and I'll never see him again." Again the four renegades showed their tobacco-stained teeth in grins. It was a joke they appreciated. "I'll help you all I can. I'm on your side," Carson went on. "If you want to know how long they could keep off a siege, I'll tell you straight out—a good long time. They've got water enough for themselves and their animals as well. If they keep it for themselves, they could hold out a week or more; and they've got a good big grubstake."

"All right, *hombre*, that satisfies us. Gents," said Idaho, turning to his men, "this means we got to horse in there and fight. I ain't promisin' you that one or two won't git dumped; but think of the reward to them as is lucky enough to last out!"

"We're with you, chief," the red-haired man said. "Give us your orders."

The gaunt scarecrow dismounted.

"Pedro, you take all the cayuses and keep 'em in that thar draw. Bill, you skirt

along that thar adobe wall and git up as far as you kin afore showin' yourself. Tampico, you do the same along this here left wall of the gulch, crawlin' on your belly through the mesquite. I'll make my way up in the middle, through the bowlder wash. Don't nobody fire till I do. When I fire, it 'll be a signal to the men at the upper end of the gulch to close down and start shootin' likewise."

The chief then turned to the disarmed Carson.

"You kin go up to that draw with this half-breed gentleman, *hombre*. Set on a rock and watch the fight. After we've killed them two unfortunates and got our re-ward for same, why, we'll check up on the food and water pack. Then, if you've told us the truth, you kin go free."

The men drew their guns and started to pick their way through mesquite brush and bowlder wash. Before they got out of hearing Carson called out:

"One thing more, chief! I want to warn you, for your own good. That young pard of mine can shoot a cigarette from a man's mouth, when the range is as far as from here to that cañon rim."

The announcement might have had a disastrous effect on the attackers, had it not happened to be too ridiculous to believe.

IV

NED HARDY caught glimpses of the three renegades crawling up the cañon when they were far out of range. Bill Crummit and Tampico advanced cautiously, darting from one bowlder to another. The leader, realizing that the distance was too great for any accurate shooting, took no great care to protect himself. He stood up, a gaunt giant of a man, in the middle of the stream bed, waiting until his more cautious companions crawled up abreast of him.

The red-bearded man appeared from behind a big rock, then darted with the speed of a jack rabbit to the protection of a patch of mesquite fifty yards nearer his target. He was more like a bear than a rabbit, however, running with incredible rapidity on chunky bow legs.

The last of the three was Tampico, the half-breed, with his huge mushroomlike sombrero. Little by little, in his advance, he had climbed the side of the wall, evidently preferring to start his gun duel with the advantage of a higher position. He was the first to sight Ned Hardy crouching be-

hind a bowlder in the middle of the stream bed.

For the time being Hardy had lost sight of the two other attackers. They seemed to be quite deliberate in their advance. The red-whiskered man had stopped for a breathing space behind an abutment of granite on one side of the dry creek. The leader had crumpled his lanky form and disappeared in a patch of bear brush.

Hardy waited for a good shot at the half-breed kneeling on a ledge of rock high up on the creek side; but Tampico was likewise waiting for his chief to advance. Confident in the belief that he was well out of range, he exposed his head and shoulders, and peered down from the ledge.

In that moment of tense waiting, Hardy glanced back to his old companion, lying bellying the sand a hundred yards behind. Directly above him, on the cañon rim, a troop of six horsemen appeared, silhouetted clearly against the red sky of the morning. They deployed, making a long line, with a horseman every furlong. The wide semicircle they made covered the whole upper rim of the gulch. Then, one by one, they picked out the steep deer trails that led from the rim into the stream bed below. Each man dismounted, left his horse, and started the descent.

Hardy realized that the bowlder which was his shield against attackers from the lower part of the cañon would avail little against the six men crawling down toward him. Even if his veteran ally had the good luck to wing two of them, there would be four left to fight; and all the time the ragged giant down in the stream bed, his fleet-footed red-haired henchman, and the half-breed up there on the rock ledge, would be advancing under cover of mesquite and bowlder. It was for this reason that Ned Hardy resolved to start the fight himself.

It was still early in the morning, and the clear, cool atmosphere had not yet started to waver across the hot rocks. It was the time of day that marksmen choose for target practice. Hardy was adept at estimating distances in these bad lands. The jumbled strata of quartz and granite zigzagging across the face of the cliff would have been as confusing to some men as the camouflage of a ship. A granite pillar that merged into a distant background seemed twice as far away. An overhanging cliff of shale banded red and pink, that was actually a mile away, seemed close enough to throw a stone

at. Later in the day, when the layers of hot and cool air refracted the light, it would be almost possible to hit a boulder fifty yards away.

Hardy took all these factors into consideration, estimated his distance, and then took aim. He was as composed and deliberate about this process as were the three men advancing up the cañon toward him.

The most dangerous adversary thus far was the one, providentially, who offered the best target.

Hardy fired his first shot. The sound reverberated from side to side, echoing like a machine gun from those granite walls.

About twenty feet above the half-breed there was a stratum of red shale, which gave forth an almost invisible puff of powder as the slug dug into it. Hardy saw this, although Tampico had no intimation where the missile had landed. He had seen the wink of light from Hardy's revolver, and the audacity of trying a shot at that distance seemed to strike his sense of humor. He got up from his crouching position and exposed his ragged carcass from the waist upward, shaking his skinny shoulders in a scoffing Mexican laugh.

Tampico was the only man in the cañon who had taken that first shot as a joke. The deafening sound, exaggerated by the narrowness of the rock gorge, had sent every other man to cover. They disappeared in mesquite patches and rock clefts, or behind cactus clumps, like a bunch of prairie dogs diving for their holes.

Again there came silence, deliberation, a period of tense waiting and suspense. Then Chief Idaho popped up from his hiding like a gaunt, broken jack-in-the-box, ran forward for fifty or sixty paces, and dived for cover.

His squat henchman circled a shoulder of the cliff, ran—again giving the picture of a bear bowling along—and flattened into a hollow of sand.

Hardy tried his second shot at the man on the rock ledge. This time he aimed twenty feet lower. A spurt of dust puffed out from the cliff a little to one side of the taunting half-breed. The range, Hardy noticed, was perfect, for the missile struck on a level with the man's breast.

He immediately followed the second shot with another, which came so close that Tampico dropped again to his hands and knees, for this time the slug had chipped into the rock directly behind him. Hardy

could not see the whites of the man's eyes from that distance, but they were certainly showing all around the pupil.

The half-breed emptied his revolver in six rapid shots, all of which went wild. He was facing the sun, which had just sent its first red ray across the upper rim of the cañon. It was like a spot light now, throwing everything else but the upper part of the cliff wall into shadow.

Hardy had fired three times, which gave him a good "shot pattern" by which to aim again; and his fourth shot went home.

From the rock ledge high up on the cañon walls a shapeless carcass rolled down, hurtling against a protruding boulder, then falling down a sheer drop of fifty feet to the sand below. The mass of rags and bones flattened in a heap that seemed strangely small and inconsequential—smaller than the huge sombrero that sailed downward like a wounded buzzard to the stream bed.

V

For the next half hour the deep gulch rang with a deafening fusillade of shots. The sun's rays slanted down through horizontal skeins of gun smoke. The thin, clear air of dawn began to tremble with the heat of day. Long blue mirages were evoked in the stream bed, so that the men hurling their shots seemed waist deep in water.

That one lucky strike at the lower end of the cañon, when the half-breed fell from his rock ledge, was seen by every one. It stopped the advance of Idaho and his red-bearded henchman. The incredible warning they had heard from the lips of Rufe Carson now assumed a different color. It was the plain, unvarnished truth. They were dealing not with an old, fear-ridden man, but with a formidable sharpshooter.

The situation at the upper end of the gulch was not quite so propitious. Six men came out from cover, one by one, and poured shots at the rock behind which poor old Pazy was crouched. He summoned nerve enough to peer above the rim of his protection at times; but it was nip and tuck—a duel of one man against six. He bagged one of the Apache half-breeds and wounded another. In return he himself was hit twice.

As soon as Ned Hardy realized that he had stopped the advance from the mouth of the gulch, he crawled up to another boulder within a few yards of his compan-

lon. He could not do this without darting across an open patch of sand. A bullet zipped through his sombrero, and another burned into the flesh of his arm, blackening his sleeve from shoulder to cuff. He reached cover, and a hail of shots ricocheted on the rock slabs all about him.

He peered over the rim and aimed at a man who was crawling down the adobe banks like a sleepy lizard—a man with a two-gallon hat, a black shirt, and ragged trousers. A spurt of light from Hardy's boulder—another from the low-crouched lizard on the bank. Hardy felt as if a heavy blow had been delivered from the air, knocking him to the earth. The lizard on the bank turned over and writhed, with his stomach upward, as a lizard will when you tickle it with a straw. Then it flattened down, as if to merge in the protective coloring of the brown adobe. The lop-brimmed hat rolled off, and there was nothing left but a shapeless bundle of rags and a bare, scraggly head, with the face turned toward the sun.

The attackers fell back, darting for the nearest boulders, one man limping, another dragging a wounded companion.

That last casualty had unnerved them; and the fact that their leader had been bluffed out by the death of Tampico, down at the gulch mouth, unnerved them still more. They did not comprehend the state of affairs. The chance that their chief and the red-headed Crummit might also have been hit terrified them.

When assured that they were well out of range, they popped up out of the mesquite and from behind boulders, and there was a concerted dash for the deer trails. Three minutes later they were scrambling frantically up the steep cliffs toward the rim and their horses.

Idaho and Bill Crummit wasted no more precious moments. They had remained safely hidden while their gang was routed, practically single-handed, by the young sharpshooter with the thin, sunburned face and the tall-peaked sombrero. As far as either Idaho or his henchman was concerned, the fight was over. They dashed down the boulder wash toward the little draw where their horses were waiting for them.

Pedro, the half-breed whom they had left there to guard their prisoner, jumped up expectant at their approach. Rufe Carson had an intimation of what had happened.

He knew something of the gun prowess of that young partner of his. He saw the desperate look on the faces of the two men as they dashed for their mounts, and an intuitive fear gripped him that they would be tempted to shoot him down without any more palaver. Wisely enough, he ducked into a patch of mesquite, where, defenseless though he was, he could at least crawl unseen into the thick network of branches and brown leaves, and wait until his captors had departed.

The renegades, needless to say, had no desire to palaver any more with their prisoner. He had nothing that they wanted—except, of course, his horse and gun, which they took in tow without a second thought.

The half-breed watched his master and Crummit leaping to their saddles.

"The fight—she is over, chief?" he asked.

"She's over all right—ain't no doubt about that!" Idaho shot back through his broken teeth.

"You have the map, then, chief?"

"Get to your horse, and stop axin' me fool questions!"

Idaho leaped to his saddle, followed by his henchman, and then by the dumfounded half-breed.

As soon as they were out of sight, Rufe Carson came out from his hiding. He found himself in a highly complicated situation. His entire procedure, thus far, had been based on the supposition that his partner and old Pazy would be killed. Instead of that, they had been left victors on the field of action. It was a very disconcerting reversal, from Carson's point of view. What was he to do? He had no horse, no provisions, and no water.

He went down cautiously to the mouth of the draw, to get some idea of the lay of the land. Idaho, Crummit, and Pedro had galloped out of the gulch, and were heading across the desert plain in a cloud of dust. Far up on the cañon rim the rest of the gang were mounting their cayuses, wheeling, and skirting the rim toward the desert, after their chief and his companions. Although Carson did not know that every man riding up there on the rim was wounded, he saw clearly enough that the raid was over.

Still entirely at a loss as to his next move, he wandered up the cañon toward the scene of the gun fight. He was exceedingly doubtful how he would be received.

He was afraid that the old mucker, whom he had deserted on the eve of battle, would shoot him down. He was convinced that his partner, Ned Hardy, would have nothing more to do with him, for he had committed an act which made him thenceforth a pariah among men. Nevertheless, there were certain motives which led him back to his former companions.

He did not relish the idea of traveling on foot to the water pocket at Mule Town. He had had too much of the desert sun for that. He must have water, food, a horse, and a gun. The renegades might come back again. He recalled the fact that they had a good reason for this fight. Certain words had given him a clew. Something had been said about the expected reward of victory—a reward probably worth jeopardizing many lives.

"Did you get the map, chief?" he had heard the half-breed say.

This was the motive uppermost in Rufe Carson's mind as he climbed up the bowlder wash of the gulch.

When he came upon the scene of the gun fight, he was shocked at what he saw. Both old Pazy and Ned Hardy were lying prostrate in the sand of the stream bed, with the sun blazing down upon them. Pazy lay on his back, his gray face turned upward, his wizened arms spread out. Ned Hardy lay on his side. His hand was fumbling for a canteen, which he tried to raise to his lips. The canteen fell from his hands, his head lolled down again in the sand, and he groaned.

Carson was astounded to see what a desperate fight it had been. It was clear that if the renegades had had nerve enough to hold out a few moments longer, they would have won. The two men who lay there were, indeed, a pitiable spectacle, the younger one helpless and wounded, the older one probably dead or dying.

The stern mask of Rufe Carson's face, with the knitted black line of his eyebrows, assumed a softer expression. A smile lit it. If the truth must be told, he was not entirely displeased. He could now enact a new rôle. The two wounded men could not afford to treat him as a pariah. They would have to accept him. They would have to turn to him for help.

He went first to his one-time partner, Ned Hardy. The young prospector turned his thin, pain-racked face toward the approaching figure. His blood-drained eyes

vainly tried to focus; his hand was convulsed in a vital attempt to fumble in the sand for his gun, which had proved too great a weight for him to hold.

"Don't shoot me, pard!" Carson cried out cheerily. "I'm not one of the outlaws. Don't you know me? I'm your pard!"

This announcement brought a light into the glazed eyes, and Ned's hand trembled in a violent effort to grasp the gun. He seemed at least as eager to fire as he had been when he thought one of the renegades was advancing upon him.

"Don't you know me, pard?" Carson repeated, kneeling down by the wounded man. "I've come to help you."

He held the canteen to Ned Hardy's gray lips. Then he unbuttoned the blood-drenched shirt, ripped off a bit of cloth, poured whisky upon it, and washed the wounds.

"They plugged you good and proper," Carson said. "Three different places, but they're only creases—flesh cuts. I'll bind 'em up for you and take care of you. You've won the fight. Maybe that'll brace you up a bit."

"Won?" the wounded man repeated in a daze. "I thought they were all coming down. I thought you yourself were coming to kill me."

"I—your old pard? I didn't leave *you*. It was the old man over there I left. I wasn't going to mix in with his fights."

"Go over and attend to him. He's been hit bad."

This was the truth, beyond any doubt. Carson went over to Pazy and examined the old man's hurts. Two clean little holes scarcely oozed blood upon the grizzled chest. There was little use in bandaging wounds like that.

The old man did not know who was working over him, and did not seem to care. He was past all that. He barely managed to murmur:

"Take me to the shade."

Carson lifted the inert bundle of bones and skin to the shelter of a bowlder. Then the old mucker said:

"Bring the boy over here, too—in the shade. He fought a good fight, that kid. I don't want him to die. I want him to live. Damned if I won't show him how to live!"

Carson obeyed, dragging Ned Hardy's powerful body across the sand.

When the sun no longer burned in his

tortured eyes, Hardy looked up into the face of the man who had once been his partner. He saw that Carson's black eyes and grim mouth smiled at him. He tried to smile back, but could not. He could only ask faintly:

"Where were you during the fight?"

Carson's dark brows lowered, but he did not forget his rôle.

"They disarmed me—took my horse and gun. A breed watched over me. If I'd known what you were going up against, I'd have horsed into the fight to help."

Ned Hardy's forehead crinkled. He seemed to be making an effort to understand a brain-racking problem.

"I believe you, pard," he said finally.

"There's good in every man—even in a skunk of a man like you. You say you wouldn't have left me?"

"I said that."

"Well, I can't judge you now. I'm too weak. I've got to lean on you. You've got to get us out of this hole. They'll be back."

"I'll get you out. I'll stick by you."

"How is it with the old mucker?"

"I don't figure there's much can be done with him," Carson replied. "He's probably got another hour of life, at the most."

Hardy's gray face turned toward the little pile of bones and rags on the sand near him. Out of it there peered two big pale eyes—optics which had once been the sharp terrier eyes of old Pazy. They were focused upon Ned with a hungry look—a look that seemed devoid of pain.

"How you coming, boy?" a faint voice said.

"I'll be all right. My cuts are all stopped with bandages."

"You goin' to live?"

"I'm going to live. You don't need to worry about me."

The eyes peering from the bundle glowed.

"I'll tell you you're goin' to live!" Pazy repeated. "You're goin' to live as no boy ever lived before! You're goin' to have hosses, thoroughbreds, a mansion to live in—a mansion in any city you pick out—and twenty *mozos* for to kotow to you, and black your jackboots, and curry your broncs, and tote drinks to you, and fan you!"

Ned Hardy looked up to his former partner, who was standing over the two wounded men. Carson's mouth was agape, and his black eyes bulged. The thick line of

hair across his brows was lifted, giving him a curious expression of amazement, awe, delight.

"What's he saying, Carson?" Ned asked in bewilderment.

Carson looked down, and his expression broke as if he had been awakened from a splendid dream. His thin lips curled.

"He's only raving, pard," he said.

"Just swollen words—locoed after the fight, I guess. Knows he's dying."

The old mucker did not hear this. He was going on in fitful gasps, a feverish energy seeming to inspire the inert and shapeless carcass. He tried to raise his head, but it could only loll back on the sand, with one parchment cheek pillowed so that he faced Ned Hardy.

"And when you git tired of Paris or New York or London, and of champagne and womenfolk and hosses, then trail back to the good old desert agin and the lonely stars, and to my hidden cañon, for to stock up with some more gold."

"What cañon?" Carson asked.

The dying mucker was still deaf to any interruption.

"Every so often you'll have to come back. Can't tote it all out at wunst—too dangerous, and gold's powerful heavy. All you need is a key to find the place. You'll have to follow a underground creek, swimming under water sometimes, and comin' out in caves; but when you git there, you won't need no pick nor no pan. Just scoop up the stuff, as much as your mules or burros will tote, then trail out. Paris agin and more thoroughbreds, and race tracks, and Monte Carlo. Don't matter if you lose every bet—just come back for more."

Again Rufe Carson's face took on the rapt expression of a man seeing a glorious vision. It was a peculiar trio—the old mucker with his big, flaming eyes focused on the thin, gray face of the wounded youth; and, standing above them, the tall frame of Carson, his black eyes gleaming with the same feverish fire.

The end came suddenly. The mucker thrust out his hand—a birdlike claw covered with parchment. Ned Hardy reached for it and clasped it.

"Here's the map, boy. It's your reward for what you've done. A good kid—a hell of a good fight—"

Ned Hardy found himself holding the map—a stained bit of yellow, the color of the hand that gave it to him.

The expenditure of energy exhausted both men. Ned sank down again in a momentary swoon. Pazy crossed the threshold of life with one terrific struggle, and then with a final gasp as if of enormous relief.

I said it was a momentary swoon; but in that moment great changes came to pass. Old Pazy died. Rufe Carson, standing with his tall sombrero shading all of his face save the sharply chiseled jaw, seemed to be born again. He came to a decision which changed him from the semblance of a man to something else so base that its counterpart could scarcely be found in the natural world.

He had before him two courses to follow. His pard could easily be nursed back to life. Hardy's wounds were only creases in the flesh which had drained his blood. Plenty of food, water, rest, and shade, and in a few days he would be strong enough to ride a horse.

Looking down upon him with jet brows lowered in a scowl, Carson reflected that the renegades would probably return. That map was too great a prize to be given up so easily. The safest course to take was to leave the fatal gulch as quickly as possible and trail off, choosing boulder washes and gypsum beds, silt or sage, so that his tracks would be hard to pick up. This could be done with a couple of horses; but to carry a wounded man along offered complications. Besides, Ned Hardy could not stand any fast trailing now.

Carson's decision was quickly made. It was the safest way—the only safe way. He knelt down beside his partner and took the map out of Ned's weak fingers. He then got old Pazy's shotgun and revolver, both of which were lying in the sand. He also picked up Ned Hardy's six-gun, and went up to the little cactus-filled draw where they had tethered their animals before the fight.

A few minutes later, having packed the water and food on Pazy's mules, he came out to the stream bed again. Ned Hardy lay there in the shade, his eyes opened, gazing at the dead mucker.

Carson mounted the pinto which had belonged to his partner. The mucker's old nag and two mules followed, their hackamores hitched to the pinto's saddlehorn.

Thus Rufe Carson played his second trick. Pazy was dead; he could not nurse

the wounded man. Ned Hardy would die soon enough. Without horse or gun, his allotted time on this earth was perhaps two days, certainly no more. If he lived longer, Idaho and Crummit and the rest would probably get him and pay him back for his interference with their plans.

To Carson, as he rode down the gulch, it seemed a perfectly natural thing to leave a wounded partner dying in the desert. The end, from his point of view, justified the means. He had heard strange words—Paris, mansions, carriages, a hundred servants, life! What did a poor wounded prospector matter? If he died, so much the better. The knowledge of Carson's dastardly act would die with him.

Ned Hardy saw the man riding down the cañon. He was too dazed by what had already happened to understand the full purport of the traitor's departure. He vaguely concluded that Carson was probably riding down to the gulch mouth to see if the renegades were coming back for a second attack.

But why were the mules with him? Ned Hardy could not answer that question. He tried vainly to answer it. He racked his muddled brains. He lapsed into a moment's delirium, then tried again to fathom the mystery. The sound of the animals' feet *clip-clopping* on rock slabs rang in his throbbing head like a pulse. *Why was Carson taking those mules?*

Then the truth flashed upon him, like the flash of a gun fired in his face. He started up with a cry, felt for his gun, and found it gone. He dragged himself to the carcass of old Pazy and fumbled at the empty holster. Then he dragged himself to the rock where he had fought. His gun was not there.

He scrambled to his feet and started to stagger down the boulder wash. He was a gaunt, savage figure, his gray face transformed with rage. A violent but gasping cry came from his lungs.

The man after whom that frenzied cry was hurled was as deaf to it as the dead Pazy. The granite cliffs sent the weird sounds back, so that Ned Hardy heard his own transformed voice as he fell to the sand.

VI

THAT same night news that a band of renegades was down in the Soda Mesa Desert reached the outfitting posts at the edge

of the bad lands. Sutlers and muckers and Indians caught sight of a troop of ragged, desperate-looking men. Most of them, the report went about, were wounded. It would be best for prospectors and other desert travelers to keep under cover.

Two travelers who had just come down from Rawhide and the Sante Fe Spur found themselves far in the heart of the desert before the warning reached them. These two had reason enough to fear such men as those of whom Chief Idaho's gang was composed.

One of them was a girl dressed in sombrero, brown woolen shirt, corduroy riding skirt, and cowboy boots. She was mounted on an old Mexican plug which was obviously desert-born and desert-bred. Her companion—or, rather, her servant—was a white-haired *mozo* with big Mexican sombrero and leathery face, and reddish eyes with the muddy whites of a Mexican. He rode another ancient cayuse—a black and white pinto.

"We shouldn't 'a' come into the desert without we had a deputy for to protect us," the old *mozo* said. "We got a heap of dangerous trail to eat up afore we git to your father's diggin's." They were riding along the Big Mesa trails, down deep cañons, across hogbacks, and out on sage plains. It was a three-day journey. "Your father hadn't orter shoved all the responsibility on an old coot like me, even though he is laid up with rheumatiz."

"They won't touch us," the girl said. "They're after muckers with gold dust."

"You don't know Idaho's gang. Can't tell what he'd do if he saw you. That's what I'm scairt stiff about. I can take keer of myself; but you ain't even totin' a gun. That's one thing they should have learned you at that fine school in Tucson where you was at."

"A girl doesn't usually tote a gun in this country."

The day waned. According to custom, the two travelers rode on for a good part of the cool night. The leather-faced *mozo* knew the trails well, even in the confusing glow of moonlight. Down into black gulches, across plains of silt that glittered like snow, through the thorn country that lies north of Soda Mesa—then it was time to camp and rest.

"Ain't goin' to build no fire," the *mozo* said; "nor I ain't goin' to camp until I get to a deep gorge which I know of, and which

it's a good gorge for to hide in. Lots of cactus-filled draws for to corral our plugs and burros; and if we get surprised by Idaho and his gang, why, we can hide in the mesquite. Been there before, many a time."

Poor old Pазzy, in trying to elude the relentless pursuit of Idaho and his murderous henchmen, had had these very requisites in mind when he chose his last camping ground. He chose a narrow gorge with a stream bed of giant boulders and a brush-filled draw for his horses. He chose it because he could see the rim of the cañon, and could command a good view of every deer trail by which an enemy could approach. Both Pазzy and this little *mozo* knew the desert well, and they knew that in this particular part of it, where the high mesas began to flatten out into a limitless sea of sand, there was only one such cañon. Both men chose the same retreat as a measure of precaution.

Thus it was that early in the morning, at about the time when the moonlight waned and the morning star appeared, the girl and her white-haired old *mozo* rode into the cañon where Ned Hardy had staged his great fight against Idaho's band of outlaws.

It was still dark as the two riders, with their pack burros, rode up into the heart of the deep gulch. The girl could see a dim confusion of boulders, cactus, and pepperwood. Gray walls merged into a pinkish light high above. A ribbon of gray sky showed between the cliffs, and in the cañon bed the sand dunes reflected what light there was, so that there seemed to be a broad river flowing down the gulch.

Against this background of sand, the girl could see areas of black thrown into sharp relief. A small dark splotch in the middle of the sand might have been a barrel cactus, overturned by the wind. A little way off was another spot of color, like a bunch of heaped-up tumbleweed; and near it a curious plant that looked like a giant mushroom.

Neither the old *mozo* nor the girl cast a second glance at any of these formless shadows. They would have needed owl's eyes to detect the fact that that narrow strip of slate rock was the body of a man; that mushroom a Mexican's sombrero; that overturned barrel cactus, over there, another dead man.

The *mozo*, riding in the lead, saw the pile of tumbleweed roll over, as tumble-

weed will. He gave it no further thought, but rode past it. His old plug shied, as plugs will shy at tumbleweed in the wind.

The girl followed, and her calico came very near stumbling over the dark shadow—except that he was a wise old desert pony, and knew tumbleweed when he saw it. He stood still and snorted, and the girl pressed her knees to urge him on.

Then a very peculiar thing happened. It was as peculiar as the famous incident of Balaam's ass turning about and objecting in human voice to its master's order that he should pass an insurmountable barrier.

"Have you come back, *hombre*, to trample me to death?"

That was what the voice said; and the girl, believing that nothing was below her mount's feet but sand and weed, had the impression that the old Mexican plug had spoken to her.

She reined in abruptly and called to her *mozo* in a voiceless scream. The old man, who was a cautious individual, dropped on the off side of his horse, with gun drawn. Instinctively the girl followed his lead. She dropped to the ground within a yard of the prostrate form of Ned Hardy.

"Whoever you are, don't shoot! Don't trample me! The fight's over, and I'm not heeled."

"Come here, Jug, quick!" the girl said. "Light the lantern!"

The *mozo* obeyed, fumbling nervously with a jack lantern while he still held his six-gun in one hand. He approached the prostrate man cautiously, keeping behind the girl, and holding the lamp so that its beams fell across her shoulder.

Ned Hardy looked up, blinded by the sharp light. Then slowly into his confused vision merged the silhouette of a lithe, slender figure, and a gleam of soft, warm light on a girl's cheek.

Whether this strange apparition was an enemy or not, it mattered little. It was, at least, a woman, and Ned's first thought was that he was in merciful hands.

"Will you give me some water?"

The girl fell to her knees, pillowed his head in her arm, and held a canteen to his lips.

"How long you been here, stranger?" inquired old Jug, with enormous relief.

"All yesterday and all this night."

"Who plugged you?"

"A gang of renegades. If you want to know who they are, you can find one over

there at the base of that cliff, and another behind that rock."

"Idaho's gang, I reckon," the *mozo* said. "We heard about it. A bunch was seen trailin' off into the heart of the bad lands—they was all shot up. Be you the one that done it?"

"Not all of it. You'll find an old man over there in that sage patch. He did some shooting, but they killed him."

"Do you happen to know, mister, that it was Idaho's gang you shot up—which they're the bloodiest gang of cutthroats this side of Mexico?"

Before Ned could answer, the girl asked another question.

"Why have you been left here alone and wounded?" she said. "They might come back."

"They'll come back, all right, but we ain't goin' to be nowheres in these parts," declared the *mozo*.

Ned Hardy answered the girl's question, and cleared up the whole mystery.

"I had a pard who turned out to be a coyote. He didn't help us when the renegades made their attack. He came back after it was all over. Seeing me wounded, and the old mucker over there dead, he took our horses and guns and left me here to die. I don't think I could have stuck through another day. It's as hot as hell with the blower off in this gulch."

"We'll take you out," the girl said.

"Take me somewhere where I can get food and water and a few days' rest, and then put a gun in my hand!"

"Let's get on the trail *pronto*," suggested Jug. "This here gulch is goin' to give me hysterics in a minute."

"Do you think you can ride, stranger?" the girl asked.

Ned Hardy tried to sit up. It was an experiment that he had tried repeatedly for the last twenty hours. He sank back in the sand, and said, as if somewhat ashamed of his utter helplessness:

"I haven't had any grub since the fight. Perhaps it was just as well, seeing these creases took so much blood."

"We'll stay here all day, then," the girl announced in a tone of complete finality.

"Stay where?" the *mozo* asked.

"Right here. We can't trail under the sun with this poor stranger."

"And we cain't stay set here, neither, and wait for Idaho's gang to come back and murder us!"

"We're staying here, Jug, till this man's strong enough to ride. Then we'll take him down to my dad's."

"Well, you've sure got some loco ideas since you been goin' up to that school in Tucson, gal! Maybe you're goin' to stay here and nurse a strange *hombre* back to life, but I ain't. I dassen't. Might be I'll be called a coward, but I ain't plumb daft."

"Then you can go, Jug. I don't want you any more, and my dad won't want you. Better go back to old Mexico, where you belong."

"But look here, gal—"

"I'm through with you, Jug!"

"But you ain't got a gun," the old fellow pleaded; "and you couldn't use one ag'in' a bunch of renegades, even if you did have one."

"I can use a gun," Ned Hardy said. "You can beat it, old man; but don't leave us unarmed."

"Well, that's a good joke! Think I'll trail down toward the border without no firearms? Me? Phooey, what a joke!"

That ended it. Old Jug was crafty, and he loved his leathery, shriveled old carcass. He knew the girl was going to stay—no use trying to argue that point; and he knew perfectly well that he himself was not going to stay. Not all the girls in the world, or all the wounded muckers in the world, could change that resolve.

She could keep the burros and her own horse—they didn't belong to him. He would keep his faithful old pinto, and he would also keep his gun. Without any more palaver, he mounted and turned his horse for the mouth of the gulch.

"Don't let him go, girl!" Ned cried desperately. "You don't know what you're doing. If he won't stay, then go along with him, and let me stay here. Some prospector will be along in a day or two to help me; but don't you stay, I'm begging you!"

The *mozo* was riding down the stream wash, a dejected, hunched figure that looked ridiculously small in that tremendous Mexican saddle. He was enveloped in a crimson light that had descended imperceptibly during the last few moments. He seemed grotesque and unreal, pitifully insignificant in that immensity of red cliffs and desert dawn.

The girl did not call to the departing Jug. She turned to the man lying before her. She seemed surprised, now that he

was in the full light. She had thought he was an old, haggard man. Haggard he was, and unshaven; but she saw now that he was a youth.

What was she to do—to follow the old *mozo*, who could protect her, or to cast her lot with this wounded and defenseless youth?

Apparently she did not even turn the problem over in her mind. She went immediately to one of the burros, and unhitched the pack. She took a flask of brandy, strips of cloth, and some water, and with these she dressed his wounds. Then she went about preparing breakfast.

Ned Hardy watched every move she made, like a hungry dog watching its master prepare a meal; but the hunger in his eyes was not for food. For the first time since he had been left in the gulch to die, a fierce desire to live burned in his veins. It brought with it, in a sudden and fearful intensity, the desire for a gun. He realized now that he was alone with this girl in the heart of the desert—and without a weapon.

"If I only had a six-shooter!" he broke out, while she was cutting slabs of bacon.

"Forget about what your pard did to you," she answered. "Let's think only of a good breakfast—and of getting you out of here!"

"I wasn't thinking of that coyote," Ned replied. "I want a gun so I can protect you."

VII

In an adobe shack, tucked away in the Big Mesas, not so far from Mule Town, the renegades who remained of Chief Idaho's gang met for a palaver.

At first there were only two men in the shack—the hawk-nosed, hungry-eyed Idaho himself, and a rat-faced little half-breed with a downy mustache. This last was Pedro, who had guarded the horses during the gun fight, and who had not yet had a taste of Ned Hardy's sharpshooting.

"Bill Crummit will be here any minute," the chief said. "I sent for him to scout around the cañon where the fight was pulled off. If any one kin read horses' hoofprints in the sand, it's Bill. But where's the others?"

"The gang she is late for to assemble," the half-breed dolefully replied.

"Tampico's dead; but I ain't so sure of Pasqual."

"Pasqual he is shoot in the heart—so they told me at Saddle Mesa, where I find the remains of the gang."

"The remains is good!" Idaho snorted. "What's happened to Snoop, and Semicolon, and Tom Gun-Nose?"

"Snoop he is shoot in the shoulder when he runs between two bowlders for to protect himself. Semicolon he are shoot in two places; very moch bones she are broke. Tom Gun-Nose he is afraid for to come back to fight some more. Too bad for us! Tom is good for long range, but he has little hole in sombrero, which he receive at twice as far range as he can shoot good himself."

"And Texas Pete—has he turned yaller likewise?"

"Texas Pete he are shoot in the lung by the old *hombre* with the map. Thees morning Texas Pete had palaver with his Creator and make surrender."

"Well, that's the hell of a fine report! And all after raiding one old man and a young mucker!"

"The old *hombre* with the map, he is dead—so they tell me."

"Well, that don't mean much. The young coot with the buzzard eye has the map, then; and he's the one I'm hankerin' particular for to find."

"It is for us, chief—you and Crummit, and myself, Pedro Garcia de los Gatos, to find thees *hombre*; and I am satisfy. Instead of one-tenth, I get one-third of all the gold."

That was the optimistic way of looking at it. The gaunt and apprehensive Idaho had seen that young *hombre* fight, but the vision of finding Pazy's lode fired him. The half-breed had not yet seen Ned Hardy in action, for which reason his nerve still remained intact.

There was one other member of the gang—a slayer who had once been a veterinarian in the Texas Panhandle, and who later, as an escaped convict, had taken refuge in the Arizona bad lands. This was the white man, Bill Crummit.

Crummit, as Idaho had remarked, was adept at tracking horses. He could remember a hoofprint as vividly as a good detective remembers a face. He could tell the gait of a horse, and in some instances its condition, by the tracks it left in the sand.

He was not a brave man, but he was a crafty one. While his master, Idaho, was trying to gather his disrupted gang, Bill

Crummit was busy with a little detective work of his own. To him fell the job of keeping track of Ned Hardy's whereabouts, though of course he was not expected to make an attack on his own hook.

When he was ready to make his report, he joined his master and Pedro at the designated meeting place—the adobe shack near Mule Town.

"I think I got some news for you, chief," Crummit began; "but it's complicated, and needs a heap of figurin'."

"Did you go back to the gulch?" Idaho asked.

"I did, but I was too late. If we'd gone right back, we could 'a' had that sharpshootin' murderer for the askin'; but you didn't dast. For that matter, I didn't dast until long after, when I was plumb certain he warn't there."

"What did you find in the gulch? I don't mean who was dead. No use goin' all over that again. The gang's shot to hell, all except us three. I know who's dead, and who ain't."

"The old mucker with the map, he's dead. They heaped some sand over him for to bury him; but, just the same, I took pains to search his carcass for the map. Well, he didn't have no map."

"Well, that's a powerful surprisin' bit of news!" the chief grumbled.

"They took his map afore they buried him," Crummit went on.

"What do you mean by 'they'?"

"After the fight, somebody else went into that gulch—somebody besides the sharpshootin' *hombre*. I seen the tracks of two new horses—tracks which warn't the tracks of any of our nags, nor were they the prints of them nags we trailed before the fight. It was a new outfit altogether—two hosses, and likewise, I could see plainly enough, they was two burros."

"I cain't see that you've gotten nowheres as yit," Idaho remarked dryly.

"I've got it all doped out," Crummit went on. "The original outfit of nags and mules belongin' to the mucker with the map, and the new outfit of nags and burros—why, they all took the trail up here to the Big Mesas. I been trailin' 'em down in the crusted sand, which it leaves fine, clear tracks. Now when I say all, I don't exactly mean every identical animal trailed this way. There was one went off headin' for the south, and losin' itself in the fine silt which I couldn't track same; and that

one hoss, I figure, was carryin' the big *hombre* which stayed out o' the fight, and which we took his horse and gun away from him."

"That sounds kind of reasonable," the chief admitted. "I don't reckon his pard would take him back, after the way he deserted him. I don't reckon we need bother about him, anyhow. He wouldn't be handed no map as a reward for the way he showed yaller."

"All right, chief," Crummit concluded. "Now here's the whole answer—the *sharp-shooter which we're after is wounded*."

"How do you jump to a idee of that violent nature?" Idaho asked.

"First, because he stayed in the cañon for a whole day and night. How do I know? Well, if he'd trailed out afore that, his horse's tracks would 'a' been covered by the sandstorm that come up the second day after the fight. Now he wouldn't 'a' stayed in that thar cañon, with the chances of our comin' back for to finish up the fight we quit, unless he was wounded, would he now?"

"Cain't seem to think up a sensible objection," the chief conceded.

"And here's another proof—after that outfit of two hosses and two jacks come into the gulch and found him, they trailed off to Mule Town, and they're there now. Which it means they're just takin' their time, and givin' us all the time we want for to git our gang together."

"How do you know the outfit's at Mule Town now?"

"Seen two nags and two burros grazin' in a patch of grama grass. It was in the dead of night, and they'd left 'em out to feed, thinkin' they was hidden from view; but the moon come up all of a sudden, blazin' light over the whole town. Then a *hombre*, which I recognized same as the hellbender we're after, sneaks out and drives 'em into a deserted saloon; and I could see by the way he went about it that he was weak—hangin' on to snubbin' posts and old broke fences and such—weak as a cat."

"This looks kind of good, gents," Idaho remarked. "You figure he's there yet?"

"Ain't no doubt about it. He's stayin' up there in the Big Mesas, recuperatin' till he has strength enough to cover the week's trail acrost the desert for to git out."

Exhaustive and crafty as Bill Crummit's analysis had been, there were several points

of which he was still ignorant. In the first place, he made a mistake about that lone rider. He had seen the tracks of one horse leading southward, and he had assumed that the rider was Rufe Carson. It was really old Jug, the girl's *mozo*, who had been dismissed. This matter, however, was of no importance to Crummit or his master. The point of serious error lay in the supposition that Ned Hardy had the map.

If Crummit had examined the sand dunes all about Mule Town, he would have found the tracks of a small outfit of horses and mules. These were the horses and mules that the outlaws had been trailing for many days. In short, they were the animals that Rufe Carson had stolen from old Pазzy.

These were the tracks that Idaho and Crummit and Pedro should have followed, if they wanted to get the map of the hidden lode. As it was, they cleaned their guns, filled their belts with cartridges, saddled their horses, and set out for the desert town in the heart of the Big Mesas, where Ned Hardy and the girl who had rescued him were hiding in one of the deserted *cantinas*.

VIII

MULE TOWN had once been the center of a desolate range of mesas, which a few decades before had been extensively explored for surface float. Around a water pocket in the mountain gulch a single street of saloons, gambling houses, and chow shacks had sprung up overnight. For ten years it flourished, and then, in as short a time as it had taken to be built, it was deserted. The assay office, the stage stop, and the saloons were given over to owls and bats. Sand drifts buried the water troughs. Mule deer passed up the street where drunken miners and renegades had galloped their bronchos and staged their gun fights.

When Ned Hardy and his companion came to the place to replenish their water, and to rest in hiding for a few days, they saw no sign of life in the two rows of abandoned shacks. They rode into a gray shell of a town, more desolate than the cactus-filled cañons up which they had just trailed. The noonday sun struck with murderous heat upon the corrugated iron roofs, and its rays were shot back by the crystalline sand, which had drifted in through every saloon door. The warped uprights of the shacks were stuck like piles into the blue water of mirages.

The two fugitives had yearned for shade during their hours of trailing, and here they would find all they needed for themselves and their animals. Besides shade and a fairly secure hiding place, they had an unlimited supply of water; and behind one row of shacks there were corrals with grama grass.

They chose a big *cantina* in the middle of the town. Once inside its walls, a feeling of immense relief came over them. They felt secure. They were like little children enjoying a lark—"playing house."

It was a shack of unpainted lumber, with a single bar extending its whole length. A gallery ran along each side, with a staircase at one end leading up from the sand-covered dance floor. Bunk rooms opened on the gallery, and a window from each bunk room overlooked the roofs of the surrounding shacks.

During that afternoon they kept their horses and burros inside the *cantina*. Any one entering the town would have no clue to the fact that two people and a small outfit of horses were hiding there. There were tracks, of course, on the sand dunes of the street, but these were gradually filling up. They would last but a day.

When darkness came, the two fugitives felt still more secure. They led their horses into the corral at the end of the town, so that the animals could forage for themselves. Meanwhile, for the first time, they resolved to risk a fire.

It did not seem to be much of a risk. There was a stove in a little room at the rear of the *cantina*. They covered the window with a poncho. The window itself faced the side of what had once been the assay office—which in itself was shield enough. The fire inside the stove could not possibly be seen from the street, and the smoke, needless to say, was invisible in the night.

The girl cooked a supper of steaming hot coffee, flapjacks, sizzling bacon, and hot beans. Her patient ate ravenously, and for the first time began to feel a return of his exuberant strength.

"This mountain and desert air works miracles on gun wounds," he said.

This was an accepted idea in the desert mining country. Whether it has any basis in truth, I cannot say. It is more probable that Hardy's recovery was due to his limitless supply of youthful health and spirits. Each hour he felt stronger; but each hour

he felt that the time for the second coming of the renegades was nearer at hand.

"If only I had a six-gun on my hip," he could not help saying, while they were laughing and chatting merrily over their feast, "I'd consider this whole business as a honeymoon!"

After the meal Hardy smoked cigarettes, and for several hours they remained in the cool dark, talking. At about ten o'clock the girl made some more coffee for her companion, for he was to stay awake during the first watch of the night. She chose one of the bunk rooms on the gallery above, and slept there.

Ned Hardy waited until moonrise, and then went out to get the horses and burros. He had left them in the corral until the last possible moment, knowing that it was dangerous to turn them out to forage during daylight.

When the moon peeped over the shoulder of a mesa in the east, the whole desert landscape burst into light. The glittering sand dunes in the street and the quartz walls of the cliffs behind the town reflected the light, so that in the twinkling of an eye the place emerged from pitch darkness to a light which, to dilated eyes, was as bright as day. The light of dawn comes gradually, but this flood of moonlight came like the turning on of a switch.

Ned hurried out to the corral and gathered the halters of his stock. The exertion wearied him so much that he had to rest, clinging dizzily to a snubbing post, and sitting for a moment on the edge of a trough.

He realized then that he could be seen from the rim of the cliffs, or from the sage plain that sloped up from the southern end of town, or from the tops of the mesas, miles away. Without wasting any more time, he stumbled along, leading his stock to the nearest shade. From that time until he entered his *cantina* he kept carefully under the shadow of the buildings.

Optimistic and happy as he was, he would not believe that he had been seen. Surely destiny could not play him such a sorry trick! He was in love—and the whole world and all the forces of the world, including destiny and luck, are always—so he believed—on the side of a lover.

They spent the whole of the next day in the *cantina*, not yet daring to relax their vigilance. The girl began to feel more optimistic. She was convinced that each day

their chances of escape were stronger. She was already due at her father's diggings on the other side of the desert, and he would be getting up a posse to search for her. The tracks their horses had made were now completely covered. Unless the outlaws had already got some inkling of their hiding place, there seemed to be no probability of their being caught.

They both agreed that they need spend only one more night in the ghost town. Ned Hardy would be strong enough then to start on the desert trail. Their horses, too, were rested. They could travel light, discard the burros, and make a bee line for the girl's home south of Soda Mesa. It was more than probable that they would meet her father riding up with a troop of horsemen in search of her.

The day passed in a flash. They had two cold meals—for they could take no chance on the smoke of a fire in daytime. They talked eagerly, happily, going over every event of their lives. They played cards. They were a strange looking couple—the slender, bronze-haired girl, and the haggard, unshaven youth. Both had been complete strangers to each other but a short while before; and now neither one could bear to let the other out of sight for even an instant.

They had their supper when darkness came—a delicious meal which the girl prepared with all her skill. The horses were put out to forage again, and for several hours the two fugitives waited together in a darkness that was only broken by the gleam of a few brilliant stars.

As the time approached for moonrise, Ned Hardy recalled the incident of the preceding night. Ever since their arrival at Mule Town he had remained in complete hiding except for those few moments. At that time, he recalled, the wind had not yet covered the tracks of his horses in the sand. The thought irritated him, and his companion was quick to sense the fact that he was brooding over something.

"If only I had a gun!" he reiterated. He had said it many times since their first meeting. "If only I could find something to fight with! Look here—my cartridge belt is filled with forty-fives, and I've nothing to shoot them with! If I had a forty-five revolver, I could stay up there behind the door of one of those bunk rooms and command this dance floor so that any one who came through that door would drop

the moment he showed his head. From the window up there I could command the street; but here I am with all this ammunition, and nothing to fight with!"

He looked through the window toward a lofty mesa in the east. A faint white light was spreading just above the rim.

"Hello! Here comes moonlight. I've got to get our nags."

He rose to go, but the girl grasped his hand. He paused, as if waiting for her to speak, but she said nothing. Words were not necessary. The hand holding his was eloquent of many things—of a new intuitive fear, of a reluctance to let him go, of anxiety for his life, of a definite but unspoken love.

"Look here, you're afraid, aren't you?" he said. "I didn't mean to scare you. It's all right—we'll get out. I guess there's a bit of hankering for shooting in me, as a leftover of that scrap back there in the gulch. Forget what I've said. We're all right!"

He released his hand. He was in a hurry to get the horses before the whole desert was lit up again. She ran after him, following him to the door of the *cantina*.

She held him again, unable to explain the sudden fear that had gripped her.

"You can't come out," he said quietly.

"Don't go!" the girl whispered. "Leave the horses in the corral. I'm afraid there's some one here, hiding in one of the shacks across the street."

He tried to laugh, but at that moment the desert moon flashed above the mesa rim.

"Well, I can take my time now," he said resignedly. "What in the world frightened you so? Did you hear something, or is it just what I said?"

"I don't know. This old ghost town is getting on my nerves. A man might be hiding in every window of those ghastly shacks over there. Look at that shadow on the sand! Doesn't it look exactly like a man with a big sombrero?"

She pointed far down the street in the direction of the corral. The moonlight had cast a shadow on the snow-white sand, as if a tall cactus grew in between two of the shacks.

"It's a sojuara cactus. Lots of 'em all about," Ned Hardy said. "Can't you remember how they looked?"

"I don't remember that one. What if they've followed our tracks here and hid-

den themselves in the saloons all around us? It's possible."

"Our tracks have been covered for a whole day."

"I don't know about that. Look at that white sand!"

Ned Hardy stared at the snow-white dunes. The girl felt him grow tense all of a sudden.

Across the street he saw footprints winding uncertainly past a trough, up to a window, where the dunes had drifted to the sill; thence to a door, and out again, up the street. They were not the tracks of a horse, but those of a man.

"Did you at any time since last night cross this street?" Hardy asked.

It was a foolish question. He knew perfectly well that the girl had stayed in the *cantina* ever since they had first arrived at Mule Town.

"You must have walked over there when you took the horses out to forage this evening. Doesn't that explain it?" she said.

Hardy was too preoccupied to answer. His mind was at frantic grips with a very disconcerting problem. Had some prospector passed through the town during the dark hours between sunset and moonrise? If so, why was he on foot? He must have left his horse somewhere and then passed by—cautiously, quietly, peering into windows and doors, with the silent tread of a prowling lobo. *Robinson Crusoe*, discovering the human footprint on the beach of his island, could not have been more confounded than was Ned Hardy.

The tracks on the glittering silt were as clear as drops of ink on white paper. Ned's eye followed them far up the street to the space between the two shacks where they had seen the sojuara cactus. He could not restrain a gasp. His heart was thumping as he caught the girl and impulsively pressed her to him. She, too, had seen it.

The shadow of the cactus was not there.

IX

A GHOST town with outlaws hiding in the pitch-dark shacks, a defenseless man, a girl who had stuck by him at the risk of her life—there you have the crisis in a few stark words.

Presently the two refugees saw a man dart across the lower end of the street—a gaunt, prowling thing etched darkly against the moonlit silt. At the upper end of the town, a moment later, they saw a

hulking, hull-necked *hombre* disappearing in a *cantina* doorway. Half an hour later they caught sight of a third outlaw—a frail-looking wisp with a giant sombrero. He scurried over a dune into a window, like a sage rabbit diving for a hole.

Ned Hardy remained in the blackness of the big *cantina*, the girl in his arms. Neither spoke. They were like two birds helpless before the winding advance of a rattler; but during that dreadful half hour of waiting, Hardy was formulating a plan.

The one and only purpose of any plan was to save the girl. It would be simple enough to tell her to crawl out under the shadow of the row of shacks, to get as near as she could to the corral without getting into the moonlight, to await her chance, and then to leap on one of the cayuses and escape; but there were too many complications in the situation.

First, she would be safer if she remained hiding to the last moment in that big *cantina*. It would take the renegades all night to find their victims. If they saw the girl riding off, they could trail her in the open moonlight.

That was one complication. A second was this—Ned Hardy knew perfectly well that she would not forsake him. The first objection might be overcome. If he could reveal his own presence to the outlaws, and draw their attack, the girl might find the chance she needed to slip away. To persuade her to desert her companion, however, was a more serious problem.

Ned Hardy went at it diplomatically.

"I guess you can understand the game's up," he said. "We can hide all night. If I can bluff them into thinking I'm armed, we may even stick out another day. If help doesn't come by that time, we're both lost."

"If you had a gun!"

It was the first time the girl had echoed his desperate sentence.

"If you could slip away, and get back before dawn!" he rejoined.

"If I can do it, why can't you?" she shot back quickly.

"They've seen the horses, and they'll watch them. It'll be a dangerous trick, but I'll draw them down to the lower end of the town. No, I won't let them get me—trust me for that. A man can play hide and seek in these old shacks all night. Just get me a gun. Come back before dawn, and bring me a forty-five. Get it from any

one you meet. I'll be in that first room up there. It has two windows—one facing the old assay office next door, and the other commanding the street. I can hide there till the light comes."

The girl hesitated. It was a desperate and horrifying game.

"There's no time for palavering," he said; "not if you want to save us both from being trapped and shot down like two helpless rabbits."

"I'll go," she said, "and I'll be back."

"Slip out, then, when you see them chasing me down there at the lower end of town. Don't get out of the shadow till you come to the horses. Then jump aboard the first bronc you reach. Can't saddle him. Just ride hell-bent for the nearest *barranco*, and stick to the sand, so they won't hear the hoof beats."

With this parting advice, Hardy stepped out through the door of the *cantina*. He saw no more sign of the three renegades, but he knew perfectly well that they were prowling around among the shacks. To get their attention involved the desperate measure of exposing himself in the light.

Before doing this, he crawled along the fronts of the saloons and dance halls toward the lower end of the town. A *cantina* with a second story and a false front that extended high above the roof cast a parallelogram of black shadow more than halfway across the street. This was a good place to cross. It was like a ford in a river—the shallowest spot.

He dived out into the light, making a bee line for the shadows of the *cantina*. He had expected to run a gamut of fire in this dash; but the renegade who was nearest to him did not care to shoot until he was sure of the fact that that fleeting shadow was not one of his own companions. Hardy had reached a window of the *cantina*, and had leaped over the sill, when a fusillade of shots was hurled at him. The lead splintered the dry boards, cut into the sill, and whizzed past his ear, and one bullet zipped through his sombrero.

At this signal two other renegades came scurrying down on the shaded side of the street. Hardy caught a glimpse of them as they passed a band of light, but after that they stayed under cover.

Hardy ran to another window and called out:

"All right, *hombres*—I'm ready to fight!"

The flash of three guns answered this challenge, but the shots were poured into the window that Hardy had just left.

The three renegades had evidently had some experience in night fighting, for immediately upon emptying their cylinders they scrambled for different positions. They knew well enough that the flash of their guns had revealed their positions.

There was a moment's respite while they reloaded. Hardy, meanwhile, had retreated to the far interior of the big shack, vaulted out of a window, and climbed through a window of the saloon adjoining.

"Come on, *hombres*, I'm over here!" he called out tauntingly.

The renegades were somewhat nonplused. Why hadn't he fired when he saw the flash of their guns? This disconcerted them. Idaho called his two companions together before trying another fusillade.

"It's my opinion that that bird ain't goin' to show his hand till he's good and ready. He kin shout out them windows at us without our knowin' where he's at; but he knows that wunst he fires, we'll git his flash—which it 'll be a duel then, three to one."

"Wait till he fires," counseled Bill Crummit.

"Ees a good idea," the half-breed conceded. "We will make the siege on thees *posada* until morning."

"Which same would be a right smart idea if we was only sure he'd stick in that *posada* till sunrise; but as we ain't, your plan's about the daftest one you ever give forth, Mr. Mex," the chief said. "They's one other powerful disagreeable doubt come to my mind," he added uneasily. "As you've told us, Bill, some one saved this here *hombre* when the same was wounded and stranded in the gulch. Now how do we know that thar person, whoever it was, ain't right here in this town, and sot on fightin' us?"

"Now you've axed me somethin'," replied Bill Crummit, stroking his knotted red beard wisely. "Which I've thought over all the pros and cons of same till I've figured out a right reasonable answer. He's alone, for two reasons. Whoever it was who found him, toted him here to Mule Town and left him here. He likewise left him a hoss and a couple o' pack animals, takin' the rest of the stock and trailin' away. Which I know this to be truth because of these here reasons—they must 'a'

started from the gulch with all their stock, the number bein' four hosses and four pack animals; and all as is left, which we seen in that corral foragin', is one hoss and two pack animals."

"Still and all, might be they's some one left to help this here wounded *hombre*," Idaho persisted doubtfully.

"If so, then how come it was the wounded man I seen tendin' the stock last night? If some one was with him, why didn't that some one gather in the stock, instead of leavin' the job to a wounded man? I tell you he's alone—ain't no doubt."

Idaho accepted this hypothesis. His henchman was a good detective—or, at any rate, he had a fertile and imaginative sense of logic.

"We'll have to take your word for it, Bill," the chief said. "Still and all, I'd like that stock watched. Pedro, you shag up there to the corral where we seen his animals grazin'. Then we'll just take it easy the rest of the night. Cain't catch him now. Too much like feelin' around for a rattler in a dark room."

This plan suited Idaho's two henchmen. When the sun came, they could take definite action.

Pedro went on his errand with a feeling of grave apprehension. Crawling along under the shadow of those gaunt, black-eyed shacks was a nerve-racking performance. The voice that had called out so glibly to them back there in the *cantina* got on his nerves. It was a taunting, self-assured voice.

"All right, *hombres*—I'm ready to fight!"

Well, why hadn't he fought? Was he going to laugh at them and throw taunts at them through those gaping windows all night?

The voice came again, and the half-breed flattened himself against the hot, dry boards of the shack he was passing.

"I'm ready any time you are, *hombres*!"

This time it came from a shack several doors farther up the street. The guns barked out. A laugh answered them.

Pedro trembled in his boots. Every shack was a menace now. As he worked his way toward the other end of the town, he was afraid to turn his back on those eye-like windows. As he passed each shack, he watched the windows with an intent, fear-rapt gaze, like a man passing a haunted house.

He reached the end of the town in a cold sweat. The animals were there, grazing peacefully on grama grass and weeds. Pedro noted, however, that there were only two animals. This was peculiar, for he was of the opinion that he had seen three, and that his chief and Bill Crummit had mentioned three. If there had been a horse, it might have escaped from the corral and wandered into the shadow of one of the shacks. If so, Pedro was too badly frightened to search.

He was baffled as well as frightened. He saw a dozen shadows that might have been cast by a horse. A burro's shadow seemed more real than the burro himself. The moonbeams blazing on quartz cliffs and crystalline dunes made a complicated pattern of jet black against a snow-white background. In that landscape, and in that ghost town, Pedro said to himself, as he wiped the sweat from his chin, a man was likely to see anything!

X

MEANWHILE the girl had found and mounted her own horse. During the gunplay that had been going on at the other end of the town, she had headed for a deep, heavily timbered *barranco*. Following Hardy's advice to avoid the rock slabs, she rode her mount across the sand dunes, and was thus able to get away without being heard.

Once free, however, a discouraging and seemingly impossible task lay before her. She must ride over those desolate deer trails in search of some desert wanderer. Even if she were so fortunate as to run into some one at that time of night, in that wilderness, there yet remained a greater task—to beg for help and get a gun, then to trail back to Mule Town, and, if Ned Hardy were not yet killed, to join him again and help him fight off his attackers.

Each step in this rescue involved chances that were heavily against her. She spent two hours galloping her horse madly down cañon beds, across sage plains, up winding arroyos, and across the flat tops of granite mesas. All the while she strained her eyes in hope of catching sight of a camp fire, a prospector's shack, or a lone wanderer.

It seemed desperately and heart-rendingly futile. She was riding away from the ghost town where her lover might already have been cornered by his murderous enemies. For all she knew, he might have been killed during the gunplay that she had

heard when she was escaping. However, she knew Hardy's motive in giving them a chance to fire, and she believed that he was quick-witted enough to elude them until morning. In any event, she must act on the supposition that he was still alive, hiding in that old *cantina*, waiting for her to come back and give him a gun.

At the end of two harrowing hours of racing, of fervent praying, of a fierce scrutiny of the moonlit wastes, she was rewarded. From the rim of a mesa she looked far down on a sage-flecked expanse of glittering sand, and saw two black dots moving, disappearing in the patches of dark sage, reappearing against the white background. They might have been two coyotes, except that their advance was too steady. They might have been mule deer following the water trails toward the ghost town.

She spurred her horse down the steep slope of the mesa side, keeping her eyes riveted upon those two moving spots of black. As she rode, they came in her direction, and by the time she was halfway down the steep trail she could see that they were two mules, one bearing a big pack, the other a rider.

If she had known who that rider was, she would not have given forth that joyful prayer of thanks to the desert air.

He was a broad-shouldered, heavy-set man with clothes torn to shreds by cactus thorn and splintered rock. His face was haggard and powdered with alkali. A straight, thick line of hair ran across his forehead. Despite the fact that his elbows were raw, his thighs cut, and his whole body bruised and scratched, he rode along humming a merry tune. Perhaps a happier and more dilapidated-looking tramp had never followed those steep deer trails through the Soda Mesa Desert. Chapped lips, split knuckles, broken fingers, a sprained knee—what did all that matter? The rider might have been mounted on Pegasus galloping on air!

His exuberance was based upon a very solid foundation—the cargo of the pack mule. There was nothing particularly interesting about that sawbuck saddle, the duffel bag, and the water can—which last, as a matter of fact, was empty. The only water the rider possessed was half a canteen of lukewarm stuff on his hip. That was the reason why he was heading for the water pocket at Mule Town. It was the

only pocket of which he had any knowledge in that whole corner of the desert.

A rest of a few hours in one of the deserted shacks, and then, after replenishing his five-gallon can and watering his two thirsty mules, he would make a bee line for civilization. The desert had trampled on him and crushed him, and despised him, but civilization would act differently. It would bow down to him and worship him and kiss his feet. Civilization would crawl on its stomach before him when he clapped his hands!

In a word, this man, whose name was Rufe Carson, was in ecstasy. He had found old Pazy's treasure cave.

The deep gorge and the underground creek had been hard to negotiate the first time. He had lost two horses in the attempt, and had fallen into a cactus-filled arroyo himself; but the sure-footed mules had stuck to the dizzy trail.

Once he found the cave, however, with its rich lode exposed like the nerve in a hollow tooth, the loss of his two horses dwindled to a mere trifle. He packed as much gold as one of his mules could carry, loaded the other with water and the remains of his provisions, and set out to enjoy the world, which now belonged to him.

The mule with the heavier load—bags and cans packed with almost pure gold—showed signs of heat stroke on the first day of the homeward trail. Carson transferred the gold to the other mule. To do this he had to part with his water. Then, much as he disliked trailing too near the country infested by Idaho's gang, he was forced to head for the ghost town and its water pocket.

When he saw the lone rider coming down the mesa side toward him, he branched off abruptly for a gully. Despite the fact that he was armed, he felt strangely impotent and vulnerable. There was no chance to flee. His mules could make no speed, and this unknown rider had doubtless seen him on the moonlit plain for a long time.

He waited for only a few moments before the sound of a galloping horse vibrated through the desert night. Carson knew that the rider could have seen him enter the gully. It was not a hiding place, but it was a good place to ward off an attack. He waited behind a boulder until the stranger, galloping across the sage plain, drew up sharp at the gully's mouth.

"Stick your hands up, *hombre*, whoever you are, and drop from your horse!" Carson called out. "I've got you covered!"

The command was obeyed, the rider dropping to the sand on the near side of the horse and running toward Carson. The latter was about to fire point-blank when he checked himself, seeing the slender form of a girl in the glare of moonlight.

"Don't shoot, stranger!" she cried. "I'm not armed. I want help."

Rufe Carson left his bowlder and stood out, a huge, looming form in the moonlight. The girl ran to him. Her hands were outstretched, as if she meant to clutch him, when suddenly she paused and stared up into his face. He was smiling as he put away his six-gun.

"Who are you, little sage hen?" he inquired suavely.

She still stared, her lips parted, her body congealed, as if some current of fear had tightened her muscles. She was looking up into a pale, grim mask of a face, across which was a jet-black line of contiguous eyebrows. She saw a square chin, a cruel mouth curled in one corner. Ned Hardy had described that hated face to her, and she knew the man at sight, even by the light of the moon. What a grim jest destiny had played upon the frantic and desperate girl—to send this one man to her, out of all the prospectors, Papagos, and Mexicans of the desert! She would have chosen to meet the lowest half-breed rustler of the border, rather than this man.

Here she was in search of some one to save Ned Hardy, and who should turn up but the one man whom Hardy wanted to meet and to kill? Would this man give a gun to Ned Hardy, and be shot down? Would he save Ned Hardy, when the only hope Carson had of life was the hope that Hardy was dead?

"Who are you, little sage hen, and what do you mean horsing right up to me in the dead of night like this, as if to dump me?"

"I tell you I want help!" the girl cried, her mind whirling desperately. It occurred to her in a heaven-sent flash of light that although she knew this to be Rufe Carson, he had no means whatsoever of knowing who she was. As Hardy had related the whole terrible story of cowardice and treachery to her, this man had left his wounded partner, confident that the young prospector would die. It was only because of the girl, coming as an angel from heaven,

that Ned was saved. What with the heat and the lack of water, and his wounds, he could not possibly have lasted through that second day.

With a speed inspired by her vital love, and by her fear of this man, she thought up a lie. It was a good lie, a clever one, a sufficient one. It took into consideration the fact that this man was a coward, and would refuse to ride with her into danger. It was a lie that accomplished everything she wanted.

"You've got to help me!" she insisted. "You've got to come with me and save my father! He's in a gulch three miles east of here, surrounded by a bad gang of desert loboes."

It was a plausible lie, for Rufe Carson knew that such things happened. He had witnessed just such a raid only a few days before. It was the same gang, no doubt—Chief Idaho's gang. He was glad to hear just exactly where they were. Needless to say, he would go in the opposite direction.

"If there's any manhood in you," the girl went on hurriedly, almost hysterically, "you've got to come! I have no gun, and I couldn't shoot one if I had. My father's an old man. He's caught there where his diggings are, and they're all around his shack, firing into the windows and the door, crawling up nearer and nearer to him!"

"Is he heeled?"

"Yes, but what can one man do against a dozen?"

"Well, I saw one man trim up this whole gang of renegades that are riding around here. It happened just two or three days ago. Judging by the way they went down, they must have had pretty dirty guns."

"You mean you won't come, when I'm begging you?"

"Don't worry! Your father can hold out, all right. They'll give up soon as he dumps two or three of 'em. Cowards, that gang. I know!"

"Then if one man started firing from the mesa rim above, you think they'd be scared off?" she asked with well assumed eagerness.

"Why don't you do it?" Carson replied.

"I would if I had a gun."

"You mean you're coming up this way to a stranger in Soda Mesa Desert, and asking him for a gun?"

She burst out in an agonized cry. It was not a counterfeit cry this time. It was a gasp from the depths of her heart—a

protest against the destiny that sent her this one coyote of a man for her to beg from in her extremity.

"Now wait." Carson laughed, as she turned to run for her horse. "I'm not mixing in on any fight that doesn't concern me; but I can see you're in the hell of a fix. Can't very well refuse a lady in distress—no man can. If it's a gun you want, I'll accommodate you."

She turned back to him again incredulously, her breath held.

"I've been toting along a useless weapon or two—I mean besides my own six-shooter—a couple of revolvers and a shotgun. Threw the shotgun away, because I'm traveling light. Lost my horses, as you can see; and, one of my mules being sick, I've no objections to traveling still lighter. Here's a big six-shooter for you right here. I was thinking of throwing it away back there on the trail a ways, but I kept it—sentimental reasons. It's silver-mounted, besides having a lot of interesting notches. Did some powerful slick sharpshooting in its day. Take it!"

Every word he said was the truth. It was a heavy gun, and he himself was not accustomed to its balance. Several times he had considered casting it away. What did a silver-mounted gun matter to him now? He was not interested in silver. As for its intrinsic worth, he could buy the most interesting guns in the world to ornament his house—the notched gun of a famous outlaw, the dueling pistol of a Alexander Hamilton, the favorite firearm of a George Washington! What value had this heavy, cumbersome forty-five that he had filched from the sick and dying Ned Hardy?

The girl grasped it like a savage clutching fervently, prayerfully, ecstatically, at some life restoring amulet, like a dying Navaho grasping a witch bundle or a sacred paddle. With the speed of a deer she turned and fled to her horse, leaped upon its back, and galloped away.

She did not go up the mesa cliff toward Mule Town. There was a better trail through a pass between this mesa and the next. She branched off to the east—and this maneuver, luckily enough, supported the lie she had told; for she had said that her father's shack was three miles eastward of them.

Carson watched her dwindling away against the glaring façade of a mesa, until

a deep black gash, which was the pass, engulfed her. He was chuckling over a little joke. He returned to his mules again, and spurred them on, striking northward for the ghost town.

He plodded slowly along. The girl, of course, would be there a good hour before he would arrive; but he was not concerned at all with her destination. She could ride hell-bent to save her father and break up the siege she was blubbering about; but Rufe Carson was convinced that she would not break it up. He did not want her to do so. He preferred having those renegades occupied while he made haste to get out of the desert.

He chuckled as he rode ploddingly along over the sage patches. This was the joke that amused him so much—he had given her an empty forty-five, and she had not taken the trouble even to snap open the breech to find out whether or not it was loaded!

XI

If there are gods who, according to ancient teaching, sit on Olympus and laugh at the foibles of petty mortals, they must have laughed at Rufe Carson's little joke; but they were laughing at the man himself more than they laughed at his joke.

For the girl knew that gun. Ned Hardy had described every notch in it, every intricate tracery of silver, every thrill that it gave him as the notches fitted into the palm of his hand. How many times she had heard him voice his yearning to feel the balance of that deadly steel, and the powerful kick against his wrist!

She urged her horse to a furious gallop over sand dunes, sage patches, and rock slabs, up narrow defiles, and over the flat tops of the lower mesas. She no longer followed the rims of the mesas, straining her eyes for the sight of a rider. She raced for Mule Town as straight as the *barrancos* and gulches would allow. If she could get there before sunrise, there was hope. Otherwise there could be no possibility, however remote, of entering the town and reaching her lover without being seen.

It was a race, nip and tuck, with the sun, which was climbing up inexorably toward the eastern edge of the earth. The girl kept her eyes focused on that horizon, where a long row of low mesas met the black sky line like the battlements of a castle.

Venus came up between two of the mesas, hanging like a bright blue lantern in the square cleft between the mesa cliffs. The black shadows cast by the moon against crystalline rocks and sand softened, changing from jet-black to the brown, feathery lines of an etching. The moon was still the commanding light, with its craters and mountain ranges in silvery relief; but off there on the corrugated rim of the desert, in the east, the sky was gray.

When she reached the edge of a cliff and looked down upon the shacks of Mule Town, the square spaces of sky between the mesas showed light. A flush came into them, like the blood returning to the gray face of a wounded man.

She rode down cautiously, remembering to pick out a sand trail. From galloping her horse she slowed to a canter, then to a slow trot, then to a walk. Finally she dropped to the ground and ran, leaping and bounding lightly down the sand wash of a gully, till she came out on the open stretch of level ground where the rows of shacks stood.

The moon still lit the western fronts of the abandoned saloons. The girl, a gray ghost flitting through gray shadows, approached the row of shacks from the east. She ran on tiptoe, her heart pounding, her breath held in imminent terror that that sun would roll up over the horizon and find her out.

Pausing between two of the shacks, she gazed upon the street.

The squat form of Bill Crummit was crouched behind a water trough in front of the largest *cantina*—the *cantina* where the girl and Ned Hardy had hidden. Far up at the other end of the town the slight form of the Mexican, Pedro, was etched against the sand dunes. Two burros and a horse were a few feet from him.

A gaunt form emerged from the darkness of a door, fled through a band of moonlight, and dropped to the sand by the side of Crummit.

As the girl was racking her brains for some plan by which she could get into the big *cantina*, a shrill whistle pierced the air. It was so close, so excruciating, that the girl felt as if something tangible, with a needle point, had penetrated her ear.

Immediately the Mexican guarding the corral at the other end of the town came darting down the street through the rapidly fading shadows.

A tall, grotesque scarecrow leaped through the gray dark toward the door of the shack next to Ned Hardy's *cantina*. A chunky form arose from behind a trough and followed the scarecrow.

The girl thought, at first, that she herself was the cause of this sudden gathering together of the three bandits. All three of them were now crouching under the protection of a wall not twenty feet away from her.

"The *hombre's* in this *cantina*," one of the voices announced. "I seen him plain with my own eyes. Mornin's comin', and he don't seem to know it."

"I seen his sombrero stickin' up over that thar window sill," said another voice. "It's my opinion he's been watchin' us all night. Why in tarnation he don't take a shot at one of us I don't know."

"Well, he ain't goin' to git no chance now that we know where he's at," declared the other. "Pedro, you shag around behind that thar *cantina* and see that he don't sneak out the back way. Likewise watch all the windows. Sun 'll be up directly, and we won't give him no chance to git away."

"Even if we do know where he's at, how are we goin' to do the attackin'?" the second voice asked.

"Leave that to me, Bill. All as you have to do till daylight is to cross the street and blaze away at him if he comes out o' the front door."

"He ain't goin' to come out o' no front door," Bill Crummit's voice grumbled. "He's goin' to just set thar and wait for light, same's we're waitin' for light. Most like he wants the clear air of sunup for to do some more of his sharpshootin'."

"Don't worry about that. Stay under cover till sunup. He won't dast show himself in the light if he didn't dast at night time. Meanwhile I'll give the signal for us to crawl into the dance hall and attack him from the inside. Long range sharpshootin' don't count for much in a dance hall fight—not when they's three of us blazin' at him from three different directions."

"Still and all, chief—"

"Git under cover afore that thar sun comes!"

This was good advice. The girl saw the chunky gray form of Bill Crummit dart across the street. From her point of view the game began to look hopeless. She saw now that the *cantina* where Ned Hardy

was trapped was surrounded by the three outlaws. Crummit commanded the front. The gaunt Idaho, ensconcing himself inside a window of the adjacent dance hall, commanded one side. Pedro was guarding the rear.

On the fourth side there was an alley about five feet wide between the big *cantina* and an assay office. Both Crummit and the Mexican could see the whole length of this space. If Hardy had climbed out of a window into the alley, he would have been under fire from two directions.

Tantalus thirsting in Hades, with the water always just beyond his reach, could not have been in worse torture. Here was this girl, holding the one card which her lover needed to save himself, and she could not deal it! Ned Hardy was waiting up there in a corner room of the *cantina*, his belt full of cartridges, and the girl was hiding in a little shack two doors away! Between them were the assay office and that five-foot alley.

She knew she could not wait. She had, using the same figure of speech, a hand that must be played. Luck would deal her no more cards. She already had the one trump.

Her first impulse was to dash boldly into the main street, running under Bill Crummit's fire. She might reach the door of Ned's *cantina*, but the odds were a hundred to one against her.

Glancing out to see if she could tell where Crummit was hiding, she caught sight of something that sent a shudder through her. A pale flame was burning far off between two of the eastern mesas. Her heart beat loudly. She felt that before it beat ten, the desert day would burst forth with its disastrous light.

Without having any plan in mind, she climbed out of a window of the shack and in through a window of the assay office. There was at least some touch of comfort to her feminine soul in being next door to her trapped lover.

The assay office had an upper story. She climbed the ladder, and found herself in a room full of barrels and boxes and the remains of what had been the assay clerk's outfit—cupels, steel molds, and bottles. Beyond this hotchpotch was a square of vivid red—a window facing upon the wall of the *cantina* five feet away.

The girl scrambled across the heap.

There was a clatter of tin boxes of ashes, and of broken bottles that had once held nitric acid. The time had come. The whole side of the *cantina* was vivid with the low rays of the sun.

The girl peered through the window and between the two big shacks. Remotely distant beyond the rim of the world there was a scarlet arc of light. Its rays slanted into the five-foot alley, and into the window of the room in which Ned Hardy was hiding. That window was more than five feet away from the girl, for it was not directly opposite to the window of the assay office. The angle made the distance perhaps ten feet.

Her impulse to try a wild leap was obviously ridiculous. Even Ned himself could not have made it; but to throw a gun across was a comparatively simple matter. She hoped and prayed that he might appear at the window. Indeed, she sharply visualized his dramatic approach in time to catch the weapon. But this was a vain imagining.

The silence hanging over the ghost town was like death. There were none of the ordinary sounds of a sunrise when nature awakes to the day. The morning came unheralded, without any stirring of trees or awakening of birds. In the desert there is no gloaming, no dawn. It is darkness, and then instantly the murderous sun is up.

The five human beings in the abandoned town were mute. The wind had died. No coyote or sage rabbit or desert lobo moved; but in that complete suspension of all sound one sharp momentary clatter broke the spell.

It was a gun striking the sill of a window and falling to the floor of Ned Hardy's room.

XII

EVERY single person in the ghost town heard the metallic sound of that gun.

The gaunt, keen-eared Idaho heard it, even though he was on the other side of the big *cantina*, hiding in another building.

Bill Crummit, nervously stroking his knotted red beard, heard it. He had secluded himself directly across the street, and the sound was as distinct as if he had dropped his own gun. He was confused. He had heard a faint clatter of bottles and boxes in one of those shacks; but in just which one there was no way of telling. In any event he could do nothing. It was impossible to join his master, for the street could not be crossed.

Pedro, hiding behind a small feed shack directly in the rear of the *cantina*, had heard most distinctly of all. He was ensconced at the very opening of the alley, and his ears, besides, were like the ears of a coyote. It was most assuredly the fall of a gun; but what did that matter? All along he had acted on the assumption that Hardy was armed. There was nothing particularly astounding in hearing a gun clatter to the floor. Probably the prospector had dropped it himself. This started Pedro to thinking. Why should Hardy drop a gun?

Furthermore, the half-breed had a vague impression that he had seen something flying across the narrow alley between the assay shop and the *cantina*. Perhaps, in climbing into one of those empty rooms, Hardy had scared up an owl. It was quite possible; and the superstitious Pedro had a particular antipathy for owls. He had as much fear of them as a lost prospector has of a buzzard.

Pedro had prayed fervently for daylight to come; but now that it was here it gave no relief to his nerves. Under the moonlight the ghost town had had a certain beauty which was pleasant to his poetic Mexican soul. Now that the sun beat upon it, the scene turned into something ghastly and hideous. Pedro felt that any move he made might be seen from one of those eye-like windows. He crouched behind the little feed shack, with a desperate fear that he himself was the trapped one, not the man hiding in that upper room of the big *cantina*.

What if his enemy leaped down into the open and started a gun duel? Pedro looked frantically about for a place to hide; but now, with the sun up, there was no more chance of hiding. He could not even run away without risking a slug in the back, aimed at him at long range.

At any rate, of one thing Pedro was quite certain—he would not start the shooting himself.

Crummit was in much the same state of mind. He realized now that if Ned Hardy wanted to fire from one of the windows of the *cantina*, he could hide the flash of his gun by firing from some point well inside the building. At night there is no possibility of concealing the flash, but in the daylight it can be done. If Hardy wished, he could pick off the first man he caught sight of, and the two remaining besiegers

would not know where the shot had come from.

Crummit came to the same decision reached by the Mexican. He, for one, would not offer to start the fight.

Chief Idaho, meanwhile, had come to the conclusion that his plan to enter the *cantina* and attack Hardy from the inside was a roseate dream. It had seemed quite sensible during the night; but now that the shack stood before him, revealed in the sunlight, the dream faded away. Idaho had posted himself and his two companions, but he was now confronted with the sober fact that he had no plan of attack. He realized that before any step whatsoever could be taken, Ned Hardy must fire a gun; but he could not be enticed to fire when his three besiegers remained under cover.

Idaho asked himself which one would be brave enough, or foolhardy enough, to step out and start the fight. He knew that the Mexican would not. He knew that Crummit would not; and he knew that he himself was no fool.

It was, in plain terms, a deadlock. It might have lasted all that day, thus becoming a *bona fide* siege; and Idaho, as has been pointed out before, was averse to sieges. Something is always apt to turn up at the wrong moment.

The chief waited for about an hour, fuming and plotting and cursing the cowardice of his two henchmen. His followers were as quiet and inoffensive as horned toads hiding behind rocks. No sound came from the big *cantina*. No sound interrupted the deathlike stillness of the town.

Then came one of the interruptions that Idaho always expected. A lone desert wanderer came riding down the street on a mule. He was leading a second mule by the halter, and the little outfit came shuffling along, stirring up a faint steam of alkali, and making a pleasant rhythm in that nerve-racking silence.

The rider, needless to say, was wholly unaware that the ghost town housed any living soul. To him it looked as quiet and lifeless as a group of warped shacks painted on a canvas. He came along under the blissful delusion that he owned the whole town. Indeed, by the smile on his face and the proud tilt of his tattered two-gallon sombrero, he seemed to think that he owned the whole desert, and the world beyond.

Down the sand-heaped, cactus-grown

street he came, past the First Chance Saloon, past a gaming house, past a shack that had been a pool room, and another which had been the Wells-Fargo office.

Idaho watched the stranger hungrily, with a shine in his eyes like the shine on the eyes of a cat as it watches a mouse coming from a hole. The chief was surprised at the face, the rags, the mules. He had seen that man before. The last time Idaho had seen him, he was disarmed and without a mount. Evidently he had since been covering some pretty thorny and rocky trail; but here he was again, riding in glory, humming a tune, and heading directly for the water pocket in the center of the town.

The newcomer had three very definite chances of getting killed before he got there. He had to pass Idaho first, and then he had to pass Crummit and Ned Hardy, who were on opposite sides of the street.

Crummit might have been afraid to fire, as it would have started the fight that he dreaded; but Ned Hardy would most certainly have taken his revenge, and Idaho could easily have shot the rider, and would undoubtedly have done so, if he had had any reasonable motive.

But Idaho played a little game of his own. Without revealing his hiding place, he called out:

"Hello thar, *hombre!* Glad to see you agin!"

The man on the mule recognized the voice, but he had no idea where it came from. Instantly the vision of the gaunt, hawk-nosed outlaw was evoked in Rufe Carson's mind, and his face turned ashen. To be caught there in that ghost town, while packing a fortune in gold, was enough to terrify any man.

Carson dropped to the ground and drew his gun.

"No use tryin' to throw that thar weapon, *hombre!*" the nasal voice of Chief Idaho called out from somewhere in the interior of the shack. "Better sling your gun and holster over your saddle horn, gentlemanlike, bein' we're all coverin' you!"

Carson obeyed. He looked in the direction of the voice and raised his hands. It would be a mistake to think of putting up a fight. Once before he had shown this gang of cutthroats that he was not a fighting man; and inasmuch as their more ruthless and desperate acts were largely due to

their fear and cowardice, he might hope for mercy. They had no reason to fear him.

"Come on over here, *hombre!*" Idaho called from his shack, "and let's talk this over." He added, as his victim was about to pick up the halter of his pack mule: "No, don't bring that thar mule with the gun and holster in here. No need of mules in this here palaver!"

Idaho had no idea what a trying command he had given. Rufe Carson had to leave his treasure and march, hands upraised, into the doorway of a gambling den. He relied, however, on his persuasive tongue.

Once past the threshold, he found himself face to face with a loose-jointed man with a hawk nose, feverish eyes, and a tall-peaked sombrero that brushed the cobwebs of the ceiling.

"What do you want of me, pard?" he asked, as the other showed his discolored teeth. "I've shown you my hand already. You know I'll never mix in with anything that you're doing."

"But you've mixed in this mornin'," the other objected; "and, once in, you'll have to set till all chips is cashed!"

"You took my horse and my gun," the other pleaded, "and set me on foot in the desert. I got these mules from old Pazy, who's dead, and I've been wandering about the desert trying to find my way out. What more business can you have with me?"

"Just this, *hombre!*—my men found old Pazy with a sand mound heaped over his carcass, and they found he didn't have what we was after. We was after a certain piece of paper, which same was a map."

"Yes, I know all about it," Carson answered quickly. "The other *hombre!*—the young one that fought you off—he had the map. Pazy gave it to him when the old mucker was about to kick off. I saw it all. Don't know what the map was about, but the old man seemed to think he was repaying Hardy for the fight he'd put up."

"All right, *hombre!* What you say sounds plausible. I doped it all out that way before you told me; but I ain't takin' no chances. I'm goin' to have a look at them mules—after awhile—and see if by some peradventure you ain't comin' Injun on me and my pards."

"Coming Injun!" the other exclaimed. "Have I come Injun on you men yet?"

"No, but you did that same to your pard, which it means you'll maybe do it

to me. I got a fight on my hands right now, in this here very town, and I ain't goin' to leave you go till the fight's over. I've a good mind to make you fight on my side; but that would mean givin' you a gun, and like as not you'd side with the enemy."

"Who's the enemy?"

"Just one man, but he's a man that I figure you'd hate to meet up with face to face."

"You don't mean—"

"I mean the pard you double crossed."

Again Rufe Carson's face turned ashen, and his lips trembled. He had convinced himself that Ned Hardy was dead. It was like being told that the ghost of a man whom he had murdered had returned to the haunts of the living.

"Where is he?" he scarcely whispered.

"Next door," the outlaw said, evidently taking a certain delight in his prisoner's discomfort.

"Well, why don't you go in and kill him?"

"If you want to know the truth, it's simple. My pard, Crummit, is a coward, and is afraid to show hisself. My other man, Pedro, the Mex, is a snivelin' desert rat, and afraid to show his yaller carcass likewise. As for me, I kin speak just as plain—I'm scairt stiff."

"What are you scared of?" Carson snorted. "He's wounded. Your men creased him good and proper. He was just about dying with loss of blood when you gave up the fight!"

"Just the same, we don't dast start the fight. We're waitin' for him to show his hand. Been waitin' pretty near the whole night, and he's slick enough to lay low."

"You mean you've had him in this town all night, and he hasn't fired?"

"Nary a shot!"

Rufe Carson's gray face lighted. His thick black brows were raised, and a smile twisted his mouth. Then there came a low chuckle which developed into a hearty guffaw.

Idaho's eyes narrowed venomously.

"What and the hell—?"

"Nary a shot, you say!" Carson laughed.

It was a *bona fide* laugh—there was no doubt about that. It shook his whole powerful frame. He made no attempt to soften his voice. It could be heard out in the street, in the adjacent *cantina*, behind the

cantina, where the half-breed was, and across the street, where Crummit was hiding—yes, and even in the assay office, where the girl was still waiting among the bottles and boxes and cans of the upper room. Every one in town, to be exact, heard that curious scoffing laugh.

"Well, you and your two pards have been bluffed out as slick as anybody I ever heard of!" Carson was jeering. "All three of you armed, and fooling around the whole night waiting for him to show his hand! And what can he show? A four flush—that's what!"

"He kin show the cussin'est sure-fire murderin' six-gun as ever a man did see!" Idaho shot back hotly.

"You think so? Well, then, here's where the joke comes in—he hasn't got any kind of a gun! If he had, he'd have started this fight you're hankering for long before this, and he'd probably have bumped all three of you off! Now maybe you can enjoy the joke—eh, pard?"

Idaho's hawklike eyes burned. It was not pleasant to have his own prisoner stand there and jeer at him. Nevertheless, the joke seemed to be worth it. At any rate, it was a joke that was predicated on a very delightful bit of news. The chief's yellow teeth showed grimly, and he focused his keen eyes upon his prisoner.

"If you're lyin' about that, *hombre*—"

"Lying!" Carson exclaimed. "Why, look here, pard—I went back after that fight in the gulch. Pazy, as you know, was dead—or, rather, just about to kick off. This fellow Hardy was creased good and proper. I could have sworn he'd die in an hour or two. I took Pazy's two mules, because they had the water and food, and hit the trail; but I knew that if Hardy saw me leaving him, he'd take one of those celebrated long-range shots of his. So I frisked him of his gun, and I frisked old Pazy of his revolver and his sawed-off shotgun. I tell you it's plain as day. That poor coot you're all scared to death of is trapped in there, without a weapon to defend himself; and here you three are hanging around waiting for something to turn up to rook your game, when all you have to do is to walk in and take him!"

The whole story sounded plausible enough to Idaho. His own knowledge of what had happened checked up with everything that Rufe Carson had said. He knew that Pazy was dead. He knew that no

map was on Pazy's body. From Crummit's previous analysis of the whole situation he knew that Hardy must be wounded; and he knew one thing else—if Hardy had been armed, he would have welcomed a gun fight. He was that kind of a man.

In any event, the news was just what Idaho needed to spur his two henchmen, as well as himself, to action. The fight must be started. Perhaps it would be no fight.

"If you've lied to me, *hombre*," he said to Rufe Carson, "I sure hate to think what 'll happen to you! It makes me shudder just to imagine what I'll have to do to you!"

"Go on—take my word. I'm satisfied. If I'm lying, I'm still here waiting for you. No objections!"

Idaho went to the door and called across the street:

"All right thar, Crummit! Git set! When you see me leave this here shack and head for the door of that *cantina*, you start pourin' your lead into that thar window upstairs."

"If I show myself, he'd dump me good and *pronto*!" Crummit's voice drifted back over the sand dunes of the street. "I'm right opposite to the hellbender, and I can't fire without he'll fire back!"

"I've just now learned from this *hombre* who shagged into town that the hellbender won't fire back. He ain't heeled!"

"Does the hellbender hisself know he ain't heeled?" Crummit retorted grimly.

"You back me up, Crummit!" Idaho shouted. "Back me up, or you'll find yourself dumped by some one else, which same is myself!"

Idaho went immediately to the rear of the shack and called out of the window to his other henchman, the half-breed.

"When you hear the first shot, Pedro, you come out from cover and dive in through the back door of the *cantina*. I'm goin' to rush the front door. The two of us will meet inside on the dance floor."

"And we will dance the fandango together, eh, chief? I don't think so!" Pedro shot back in amazed scorn. "You ask me to come from my cover! *Carramba*, ees a good joke to laugh!"

"You show yaller when I make this rush, Mr. Mex," his master warned, "and you'll find yourself chawin' at the sand, with the coyotes chawin' at your neck! I'll dump you in the bat of an eye for desertin' on the eve of battle!"

"But the *hombre*, he will shoot to kill me in the heart!" Pedro begged. "I can not come from the cover, chief!"

"He ain't goin' to shoot to kill nobody!" Idaho called back. "He ain't got nary a thing to shoot with, exceptin' his mouth, same as he shot at us last night when he was laffin' at us!"

The Mexican turned this astounding announcement over in his mind, and then began to mumble prayers. He would wait. If his leader entered the *cantina* and was not dumped, well and good. Pedro would follow suit.

All this shouting, needless to say, was heard by Ned Hardy, waiting up there in the corner room of the big *cantina*. He slipped six cartridges home, and the click of the cylinder snapping shut sent a thrill up and down his spine.

A smile was on his unshaven, desert-burned face.

XIII

"You follow me, *hombre*," Idaho said to his prisoner. "Don't try to run away, because you won't git far. I'm keepin' one eye on you!"

Carson, obedient and disarmed, followed Idaho as the latter slipped out to the street. The two men, protected from Hardy's aim by the roof of a piazza, reached the entrance of the *cantina*.

As Crummit saw the two men about to enter the building, he fired his first shot into the upper room, where he had caught sight of the tip of Hardy's sombrero. He waited, and then fired again. He fired six shots, and got no answer.

This emboldened both Crummit and his chief. The latter stepped into the dance hall, his eye scanning the piles of sand on the dance floor, the barrels, the long bar, the "grand staircase," the stage, the booths, and the gallery above.

Crummit meanwhile kept up his fire, his shots cutting into the wall of the *cantina*, splintering the window sill, and zipping through into the corner room.

The half-breed, hearing the shots, darted across the corral in the rear of the shack, and entered the back door. He saw his chief standing on the dance floor, now supremely confident that there was to be no fight.

"Go on up there, Pedro, and knock at that door!"

"Me knock at the door, chief?" the

Mexican pleaded. "He will burst upon me like the wild cat!"

"Go on! He ain't armed, I tell you!"

"But he will kill me to death with his fist! Ees a very fierce *hombre*!"

"And I'll kill you to death with this here gun, Mr. Mex; so take your choice!"

Pedro sneaked up the stairs, mumbling and whimpering prayers to his saints. He crawled along the gallery, passing the doors of the bunk rooms, until he came to the door next to Hardy's. Then he clasped his hands and called down to the dance floor, where Idaho was standing.

"Chief, you send me like a sacrifice! I am faithful slave, and yet you send me to my death! If thees devil is armed—"

"If he's armed, it's two of us ag'in' him, ain't it? This ain't the time to turn yaller! Go on!"

"I beg you, chief, on the knees, save me my life! Shoot at the door, and then I will knock."

"I know what I'm goin' to shoot at, if you don't do what I'm tellin' you!"

The half-breed crawled a little farther, and then, mumbling curses upon his chief, he approached on tiptoe to the fatal door.

"Go on, Mex!" Rufe Carson called from underneath the gallery. "I tell you he ain't armed! Think I'm lying? What would I gain by that?"

This gave Pedro the needed spur. He delivered a timid tap on the door with his brown knuckles, and then shouted in a high but shaking voice:

"Come out, *señor*, to be prisoner! Come out, or I splinter the door by a thousand pieces. Come out, or I fire for to kill!"

"Open the door yourself!" Idaho called from the dance floor below. "What's he want to open it for?"

"Open, *por Dios!*" the Mexican cried in the same tremulous comical voice. "It is I, Pedro Garcia de los Gatos, who spik!"

"Don't make him laugh, Mex!" Idaho shouted irascibly. "Open it! I'm ready to plug him!"

Before he had finished his sentence, the door was thrown open from the inside, and the chief, looking up across the gallery balustrade, caught a glimpse of a tall-peaked sombrero just above the head of the unfortunate Pedro. At the same instant there was a crashing blow, and Pedro's form went limp and fell forward toward the partly opened door.

Idaho fired twice, although the only tar-

get that offered itself was the peak of Hardy's sombrero. One of the slugs cut through the felt, missing Hardy's skull by a fraction of an inch. The second shot was lowered a little too much. Pedro, already knocked senseless by Hardy's upper-cut, was being held up as a shield, and his own leader finished him with that second shot.

And then from between the two men—Hardy and the lifeless carcass he was holding up—there came a white flash of light. Rufe Carson did not see that flash, for he was well beneath the gallery; but he heard it, and he naturally supposed that the man who had fired was the Mexican. Idaho was of the same opinion—for the fraction of a second. Then his face changed as if he had received a baffling surprise. He staggered back toward the protection of the gallery, his thin, long hand clutching his breast.

As he turned, he saw Rufe Carson waiting there, mouth agape, eyes bulging.

"What's happened?" Rufe gasped. "Are you hit?"

"Yes. I'm hit! Damn you, you lied to me! He's heeled!"

The wounded man swayed forward, catching an upright, against which he lurched and sank to his knees.

"I didn't lie!" Carson cried frantically. "Why should I lie? He ain't heeled, I tell you! Put down your gun! Don't shoot! I tell you, before God, I didn't lie!"

"You sagebrushed us, that's what, so as all three of us would git dumped afore we had a chance! And here's how you pay—"

"I'm begging you, pard!" Carson screamed. "I've helped you all along! I've been on your side all along! I beg you for God's sake!"

Both men were on their knees now, the mortally wounded Idaho holding himself up by the warped post, and Rufe Carson groveling on a sand pile not four yards away.

"Don't shoot me like a dog, I'm begging you, pard! Here, take this! It's the map—the map of Pazy's lode. It's yours, if you'll only spare my life—"

He held it out and threw it so that it fluttered before Idaho's blood-drained eyes. It was as if a man had thrown a piece of meat to a crouching puma.

But Idaho could not understand. He could only see the one indubitable truth—

that he had been double crossed. He fell forward, and his gun barked out at the same moment, crashing into Carson's gibbering prayer.

Carson's voice died to a groan, and then went out like a candle flame snuffed by a breath.

Hardy had stepped back into his room. He peered through a knot hole to the street, where Crummit, ignorant of the fate of his two companions, was firing a random fusillade into the window. The fact that he could elicit no response emboldened him, and he came out into the middle of the street. A neat shot carefully aimed at the top of his sombrero band dropped him as if he had been hit with the keen blade of a heavy ax.

Inside, Rufe Carson and Chief Idaho lay on the sand of the abandoned dance floor, deaf to that brief gun duel, deaf to all sound.

As the girl looked down into the alleyway from the window of the assay office, she caught sight of the street, and of Ned Hardy running out there, with his six-gun in hand. He came in between the big *cantina* and the assay shack, and called up to her:

"It's all over! Idaho shot his own Mex, and killed Carson. Come on down!"

A moment later the girl dashed out into the street and into Ned's arms.

"I found this paper on the dance floor where the two men were lying," he told her.

The girl looked at it. She saw the words "Borax Mountain" and "Dead Wolf Creek." There was a cross where the creek went underground, and near it was another cross with the note:

Cave in sandstone stratum where the lode is at.

"I've heard my father talk about a hidden cave and an underground creek," she said. "He was always dreaming of a lost lode near Borax Mountain that men have tried for a century to find."

Hardy rubbed his forehead, as if he were trying to remember a peculiar dream.

"I've seen this map before—somewhere—many years ago—when I was a child. No, that's not it! I've seen it as if it were only yesterday!" His face lit up suddenly. "I remember now—Pazzy was dying, and I was lying in the sand near him. I

was sinking away with the loss of blood. It's all like a dream. Pazzy said I must live. He said I'd have thoroughbreds and carriages and mansions. That man Carson was standing up like a great shadow over us. I remember Carson laughed and said that Pazzy was dying and raving. I believed nothing the poor old man said; but now I remember that he thrust this map into my hand!"

"It's the map of the lost lode!" the girl cried excitedly. "It's what those outlaws were trailing Pazzy for!"

Ned Hardy spread out the crumpled paper eagerly, feverishly. His eyes devoured every contour line, every note, every cross. Then he darted a queer glance at the girl, as if for the moment he had completely forgotten that she existed. A change came over his face.

"It's yours!" he blurted suddenly. "It's yours for keeps. You won it. You deserve it. Every grain of gold, every nugget of that lode, is yours!"

She smiled indulgently.

"You certainly are an Indian giver!" she said.

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Ned, puzzled.

She did not explain; but she expected—judging from his face, which she could read as a mother reads the face of her child—that he was going to ask for that map and its gold mine back again.

And so he did. It was while they prepared to hit the trail for her father's diggings south of the desert. They examined the pack that Carson had brought on one of the mules. A big cargo had been hitched to the sawbuck saddle. There were several canvas bags and a number of cans labeled baked beans, peas, stewed corn, succotash, Spanish tamales. Every can had been neatly sliced open, the vegetables cleaned out, and the tops pressed back again into place. Each can contained tiny nuggets and yellow dust.

"Carson has been there!" Hardy exclaimed. "He must have taken the map from me when I was lying in that gulch! Well, we'll forget him. The game's over and won. It all belongs to you!"

"What do you get out of fighting for Pazzy?" the girl asked. "Pazzy gave you the map."

"And I'm giving it to you. You've done more than I have. You picked me up, a stranger in the desert, and stuck by

me to the death. It's your reward. What do I want of gold now? I'm after something a million times more precious than that!"

"What can that be?" she asked, her eyes widening as if with the wonder of a little child.

He had not the slightest idea that she understood perfectly well what he meant.

"I want you!"

"Well, you can have me," she answered with a laugh. "And Pazy's lode comes back to you. I told you you were an Indian giver!"

THE END

He Wanted to Kiss a Girl

HEREIN IS REVEALED HOW ONE DESERVING YOUTH PURSUED
A LONG AND ROUNDABOUT COURSE TO GAIN
HIS HEART'S DESIRE

By Homer Croy

CLAY SWAN was eighteen years old, and he was going through that living hell of wanting to kiss a girl, and not having quite enough courage to make the plunge.

He wanted to put his arm around one of those fascinating creatures, and then—oh, joy!—buss her. That was what Sam Gruber called it.

Sam, who lived down the road a couple of miles, had no such timidity and hesitation as that to which Clay was prone. Clay had drawn his car up by the side of the road where Sam was mowing a fence row.

"You gotta go after 'em hard," Sam explained. "Rush 'em off their feet. Of course, girls pretend they don't like it, because that's their nature, but don't pay any attention to what they say—just grab 'em and buss 'em."

The girl Clay was really thinking of was Kitty Kelly, who also lived near Clay, and who was the pick of the neighborhood. He had driven Kitty in to the movies in Junction City a few times; he had taken her on an all day fishing party, and once he had taken her on a hayrack ride—and if a fellow can't kiss a girl on a hayrack ride, he might just as well give up.

Once he had actually got his arm around Kitty, but she had given him a severe look and flung his arm away.

"Don't do that again," she said, and Clay never had.

Other young men in the neighborhood kissed girls and thought nothing of it, but such boldness was no part of Clay's nature. Sometimes, when he thought of kissing such a wonderful creature as Kitty Kelly, he felt ashamed of himself.

People had told him that a boy shouldn't think of kissing a girl unless they were engaged, and he had read in books that a boy should look upon a girl as being so noble and wonderful and holy that he shouldn't think of anything so base as kissing, but the fact remained that Clay wanted to kiss her, and yet couldn't bring himself around to where he dared make the attempt.

"I think maybe I could, if I could meet some girl I didn't know," Clay ventured to confess to Sam. "I'd be ashamed to death if I tried to kiss one of these girls around here, and she'd whale loose and slap me. That would be awful!"

Clay shivered at the devastating thought. He had never told Sam of the time Kitty had flung his arm away.

Sam chewed the soft end of a stalk of foxtail, meditatively.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," he announced. "We'll run away—you and me. We'll run away to Chicago, and we'll get us some girls, and we'll squeeze 'em—that's what we'll do, by heckity!"

"Besides," Sam added, "my pa's working me too hard, anyway."

Sam was inclined to be stout—in fact,

quite a bit inclined, while Clay was tall and slender, with a pale, æsthetic face. Sam was bold, while Clay was timid and retiring, wholly lacking Sam's great self-confidence and poise.

"Think of going some place every night!" exclaimed Sam. "No danged cows to milk—and go out to stylish restaurants and eat all you want to."

Sam's voice vibrated at prospect of such a heaven. "Chicago is a fine city to go to," he went on enthusiastically. "Somebody is always being robbed, or killed, or something in Chicago—beats any place in the world for that."

"But what if—if something should happen to us?" Clay inquired.

"Nothing's going to happen to us. What could?"

"My father won't let me go," said Clay.

"My pa won't either, but they ain't going to know anything about it until they find a note on the pillow not to worry. We'll just disappear a few days, live under assumed names, and then come back and nobody'll know anything about it."

The more the boys turned over the idea the more alluring it seemed, which is the way such ideas have.

When Clay drove on, the details had been arranged. Sam was to come to the Swan homestead the following night, after the family had gone to bed, and the two were to start.

II

CLAY heard a sound the next night outside his window—a long, soft *sss-sh-h*. He swung down the lightning rod, and the two adventurers crept out of the yard.

Clay felt the mystery of the hour, the wonder of the blazing stars, and heard the soft rustle of the endless corn in this section on the line between Missouri and Iowa. Now and then a bird went fluttering away, leaving a thin line of chirps and calls in the air.

A horse inside a pasture fence lifted his head, trumpeted, and went cantering off, its feet plopping on the ground. The powder puff of a rabbit's tail went down the road, silently rising and falling.

They passed a little square house near the road, and Clay's heart beat rapidly. It was Kitty's house.

On the porch he could see the chairs still left in the soft summer night. It was here that he had tried to kiss Kitty.

"I'll have had all I want of busses before I see her again, I'll bet," he said to himself resentfully.

"It 'll be a lot better in Chicago," he added.

III

THE noise, the stir and bustle of the Union Depot in Chicago quite thrilled Clay Swan. How much better this was than poking around Junction City; and yet at the same time he felt timid.

But there was no hesitation on Sam Gruber's part. "We'll show 'em who's here," he said.

Checking their suit cases, they started out to look for a place to live.

"We'll get some sort of rooming house, because it 'll be cheaper than a hotel," said Sam, more worldly than Clay.

As they rode along on a street car, the houses began to get dingier, and the streets to be filled with ragged, shouting children. Unaccustomed to evaluating city ways, the country boys gave it no heed. They saw a sign in a window—ROOMS.

"Let's try this," Sam suggested.

Swinging off the car, they mounted the stone steps to the house and rang the bell. A tubby woman, wearing a dusting cap, came cautiously to the door and peeked through the opening, surveyed them a moment, and, still guarding the crack, pulled off her cap and gave it a hitch out of sight.

"Vas there somet'ing maybe I can do for you?" she inquired.

They followed her up a set of stairs padded with thick, dismal carpet. As they reached the floor above and started down the hall, Clay heard a slight noise and looked around.

One of the doors behind them had silently opened, and he saw a man peering out—a man with a ragged, unkempt beard, and dressed in an old, tattered bathrobe.

"That's Stein," said Mrs. Bamberger, the landlady. "He's always lookin' efery time anybody comes into the house."

"But," she added, with professional cheer, "he'll be a nice man for you to know—maybe he wear der old bat'robe, but he's rich, *ack so!*" and her tongue popped with the satisfaction of a cork coming out of a bottle.

And from what Mrs. Bamberger said, they understood that Stein was an eccentric hermit, who preferred her house on account of its cheapness.

"I got me a goot bunch now," she declared, as she waddled across a room to throw up a window. "There ain't none of 'em, hardly, electric light users, and they don't hog der bat'room, and they come across mit der money *schnell*."

"Some of 'em I got by me six mont's," she added proudly.

"All right, we'll take your room," said Sam, who was not interested in the length of residence of Mrs. Bamberger's roomers.

IV

"Now," Sam remarked to Clay, as they went on their way, "we got a place to hang out. The next thing is the girls."

But it was easier said than done. Chicago seemed filled with girls—young, slim, attractive girls—but they were all hastening on errands of their own. They were in the stores, in the soda fountains, in the restaurants—everywhere—but Clay held back, hoping some good fortune would automatically make him acquainted with one—but no such luck.

Sam, on the other hand, did not wait for this good fortune. He smiled, he ogled, and he made himself most agreeable, but only a faint, returning smile now and then rewarded him.

"By hickity, they're hard to get acquainted with," he asserted. "The way they act, you'd think we was trying to kidnap them, or something."

That evening they went to a vaudeville show.

"Maybe we'll be set down beside a good-looker," said Sam.

Instead, it was a puffy old man who whistled slightly through his nose.

The two youths promenaded up and down the corridor during the intermission, but all the girls appeared to have escorts. After the show was over, the two walked along the street, hoping to make an acquaintance, but without success. Two days passed in these fruitless wanderings.

"We ain't going at this right," Sam admitted on the third day. "I asked a fella at the cigar store, who seemed to have a little red blood in his veins, and he give me a good idea. The best place, he says, is a dance hall. We're going to rent a coupla dress suits and step out big."

Clay was stirred by the boldness of Sam's idea—renting a dress suit and going to a dance hall! Never in his life had he had on a suit of evening clothes, and he

had been to only a few dances such as Junction City afforded. But, in spite of the small opportunity he had to exercise the art, he danced fairly well.

They rented suits at a small, upstairs emporium with great yellow signs painted on the front of the building announcing that evening clothes could be obtained on short notice, and, taking the suits on their arms, they started to the boarding house.

As they were going up the stairs, the door to Stein's room again opened, and his bewhiskered face peered anxiously out; his suspicious, watery eyes blinked a moment, and then the door closed again with the air of sheltering one constantly on his guard. A heavy bolt inside grated.

The boys, excited over their shopping, continued on the way to their room.

Sam examined his suit.

"The last fella that had it must of sweat a good deal, but it's going to be all right," he remarked. "It's the way you wear 'em that counts."

"The only thing," Sam continued, "is that I wish we had more to spend to-night."

V

GETTING on a street car, they started for the dance hall. The glitter of the night unrolled before them—the brilliancy of the store windows, the restless human tide beating on the sidewalks, luxurious automobiles stealthily rushing up, lines of cars before theaters, doors opening and shutting, an overhead sea of electric lights winking on and off, queer, outlandish figures chasing each other in endless circles.

They heard the soft approaching groan of the elevated, its sudden drowning, engulfing roar, the spectral gliding by of its winking windows, then the dying away of its soft thunder, now and then a faint shriek—gone.

They got off.

"There it is," said Sam, and Clay saw a huge electric sign with Danceland spelled out in glittering, ornamental lights, with a lone light racing endlessly around its oblong border.

Clay heard the beat of the music, and upstairs, through the lightly curtained windows, they could see faint, moving forms. A few couples were going up the stairs, while at the foot of the steps unknown loungers lingered, eying ankles and calves, and sometimes knees.

As Clay and Sam passed up the steps,

the beat of the music grew louder, and there was the rhythmic shuffle of many feet. The doors opened, and Clay had the confused sense of seeing much gold and glitter, a humming hive of humans.

He caught a glimpse of a great room moving and flowing, hesitating, pausing, yet moving on again in unison with the weird music. On a little platform was the orchestra in evening clothes; and when it stopped playing, another orchestra began.

Along the walls were rows of tables, and here people were seated, drinking and openly eying one another; now and then a man and a girl, seated at different tables, got up and, going onto the floor, fell in with the rushing, swaying, jiggling mass, and went bobbing out of sight.

"Say," said Sam, "ain't this fine? This is what I call living."

Never before had Clay beheld such a brilliant scene—the mirrors, the gold, the luxurious paintings on the wall, the waiters in uniform, the beat of the music, the soft, rhythmic rush of many feet; a multitude of people swaying, bending, couples hesitating, seeming to stand still a moment, then rushing swiftly and lightly away.

But a more experienced eye would have seen that much of the gold was merely gilt. And the dancers, who appeared so wonderful to Clay, were in reality mostly like himself—small clerks and workers out for a holiday, but under the skillfully colored lights, and with the background of movement and music, they took on new glories.

The two ordered lemonade, and as they sat drinking it, Clay's eyes fed on the faces around him. How pretty the girls seemed.

Now and then a fair creature sitting at a table was approached by two men, and there was a mumbled introduction by one of them; or sometimes the floor manager, in evening clothes, effected an introduction between a girl and a boy; a moment later the couple was lost in the moving, swaying throng.

Clay's heart began to beat excitedly. How could he get acquainted with a girl? How wonderful that would be, to put his arm around her and go gliding off into the crowd. Then later, maybe, the buss!

VI

His gaze fastened on a girl sitting at a table alone, sipping some harmless drink. As she lifted her glass, her eyes roved the room. At the moment Clay looked, their

eyes met; he moved his away hastily, for he had none of the bold effrontery so many youths have.

And elaborately the girl pretended to be gazing elsewhere, but a few moments later Clay again found himself staring into her eyes. And again he moved his eyes aside.

The music arose until it swept and pulsed through the great gold room. He found his breath coming fast, and a queer half-suffocating sensation at his heart.

He stood up before he realized it; never before had he been so bold, but the lure, the romance, of this new life was upon him, and he found himself boldly approaching the girl.

But now she had turned her head aside, suddenly very much interested in something else.

Clay paused awkwardly at her table.

"Pardon me," he said, but the girl did not look around.

It seemed to him that every one in the dance hall must be looking at him, and intensely he wanted to turn and hasten back to his seat, but now that he had started he must go through with it.

"Pardon me," he began again, "may I have the pleasure of a dance?"

The girl gave a start.

"I'm sure I don't know you," she said.

Clay stood, running his hands in and out of his pockets. His palms began to perspire, and, seizing his handkerchief, he wiped them elaborately.

"Excuse me, I thought maybe— You see, I am Mr. Swan," he said, and backed away, his face reddening.

What an awful mistake! Naturally she wouldn't have anything to do with him. What a fool he was!

"Excuse me," he repeated, starting toward his seat.

There was a faint, arresting movement of her hands.

"I thought maybe you were a masher," she explained. "A girl can't be too careful. You know how some men are."

"Yes," returned Clay eagerly. "They ought to be jailed. I don't see why they don't pass a law against them."

He felt a sudden, bursting buoyancy. He had not suffered the humiliation of actually being turned down. He had kept his pride, and now he looked upon her with deep thankfulness.

But all the time the words were coming out of his mouth he was thinking specu-

lately about her. Evidently she was tall, and she was pretty, even though she had on too much make-up, and her lips were too red.

"It's a lovely waltz," she remarked, her eyes drifting to the dance floor. "I love waltzes, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, I do," he agreed eagerly. "I think they're fine. They got it all over fox trots. Could I have the pleasure of dancing with you?"

VII

THE girl arose, and Clay put his arm around her. There was a moment of hesitation, then came the rising, pulsing sweep of the music, and the two moved off in step together.

She danced well, with an easy, skillful abandon which put him to his best efforts to equal. After a few steps she looked upon him with approval.

Clay felt a glow. How wonderful it was, the romance, the mystery, the excitement of it!

They threaded their way in and out, passing other whirling couples. Clay felt the flutter of skirts against him, unexpectedly stared into luminous, unknown eyes—and then was swept on again.

"You dance well, don't you?" Clay demanded gallantly.

The girl smiled. "It's kind of you to say so. You know, I have danced with Rudolph Valentino. It was here in this hall. Oh, there was a great crush, gangs of people, and all that, and all the girls were crazy to dance with him. I don't know how it was—I guess he just happened to select me." And she smiled up at him again. "He's a lovely dancer. Lovely eyes, too. I think eyes tell so much, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," returned Clay, earnestly.

A moment later he found himself gazing into hers.

"I like good dancers," said the girl. "Do you come here often?"

"I was never here before."

They danced in silence for a few minutes. He felt the suppleness of her body under his hand, faint, delicious stirrings, now and then the pressure of her body against his.

"We dance rather well together, don't you think?" she asked.

"Yes, we do," Clay replied fervently. "I—I don't know when I have enjoyed a dance so."

"Didn't I see you sitting with another gentleman?" she asked.

"Yes, that's my friend."

"Does he dance?"

"Y-es, some," he answered.

"Is he nice?"

Clay looked at her in surprise.

"I mean, is he—well, you know, all right—like you?"

Clay thrilled to the compliment. How wonderful it was to be able to charm the ladies. A glow of pleasure mounted in him.

"Sure, Sam's all right," he replied.

"That's my brother's name, too. What's your friend's other name?"

"Gruber—Sam Gruber."

"I have a friend here, too. Maybe we could introduce Mr. Gruber, and make it a foursome."

"That 'd be fine," Clay agreed.

The number with its encores was over, and Clay led the way in Sam's direction, and went through a mumbled introduction of the pair.

Sam extended a plump palm.

"Glad to meet you. I don't mind telling you that you and your pardner made the swellest team on the floor."

As they talked and laughed, the girl led them in the direction of another girl sitting alone, also highly rouged and powdered, with a hard, glittering prettiness.

There was an introduction, and again Sam held out a hearty hand.

"I didn't get the name, lady."

The girl laughed.

"The etiquette book does say to introduce people plainly, doesn't it?" And then she looked with sudden appeal at her companion. "Don't you think we might give them our pet names?"

"You know," she turned to Clay, "we only give them to people we think we're going to like *very* much. Her pet name is 'Babe,' and mine is 'Chee-Chee,' but I spell it C-h-i-C-h-i. You can call us that if you want to."

Clay thrilled; how exciting it was to meet such pretty girls, such dashing city girls, and to be able to call them by their pet names.

"All right, Chi-Chi, that goes for me," said Clay, and there was laughter again. And as the girls stood they kept moving their vanity bags restlessly, and when there was a moment's silence they rushed in to fill it with shrill laughter, and giggles.

"You're a poet, d'you know it?" returned Chi-Chi, and again they laughed, and again the vanity bags twirled.

"How about something to drink?" asked Sam.

They found a table, and harmless drinks were ordered. But when Clay paid for them he found them costly. Going out "sporting," as Sam called it, was an expensive matter, but now, in the excitement of the adventure, the money seemed nothing to him.

He must not let the girls—seemingly so fashionable and accustomed to the best—suspect that he hesitated, and so he ordered with a flourish.

The laughter and talking went on at the table while the music pulsed over the room. Babe began tapping her foot and humming the air.

"Let's dance," Sam suggested, and in a moment they were on the floor.

From time to time Clay glanced at Sam puffing through the crowd, his arm extended at full length and pumping rhythmically, his head bent toward Babe's painted face. Now and then his hearty laugh rang out plainly.

VIII

THE four returned to their seats, and there were more refreshments to pay for.

Clay was astonished to hear Babe say, with a meaning look at the other girl:

"Oh, Chi-Chi, Mr. Gruber tells me he is stopping at—" and she pronounced the name of a fashionable hotel.

Sam touched Clay's foot under the table. "We always stop there," he explained, in his big way.

The girls exchanged glances; evidently here were two well-to-do young men—their evening suits, their money. The glittering eyes of the girls no longer wandered nervously over the room; their interest now was only in their companions, and they became even more animated.

"What do you say to another?" asked Sam, indicating the dance floor. "When I get het up I like to keep a going."

They moved onto the dance floor. And again Clay was stirred by the thrill of the great adventure.

When they returned to the chairs, after the number, he found he was talking about eating places.

"I know of a nice road house," said Chi-Chi, her hand lingering on his arm.

And she began to describe it. It was *chic*, and she pronounced it in correct French; most fashionable, quite the go, she said; it wouldn't take long to drive out. And then the question came out: Did Clay have a car?

Clay's mind was churning. What an adventure it would be, but there was the matter of expense. The music, the excitement of the evening, the stimulating presence of the girls swept through him. The redness of their lips—

In a few minutes Clay found himself proposing that they go. The idea now seemed almost his own.

"Wait till I ask Mr. Gruber," he said, as the final barrier was torn down.

"Sure," Sam agreed, "grab it. Didn't I tell you I could start something? Ain't they the swellest chickens you ever laid eyes on? Don't be afraid—fuss 'em, fuss 'em."

"Mr. Gruber says he'd like to go," said Clay, returning. "I have a car, but it isn't here. Wait a minute and I'll go out and see what I can do."

Clay dashed away, swept on by this stirring adventure. He stopped at the office of a Rent-a-Ford—drive-it-yourself agency, and applied for a car. There was the matter of giving his name and address, and Mrs. Bamberger's telephone number. The man stepped into a private booth and called up the number.

"That Bamberger number seems upset," he said as he came back. "Said they couldn't answer any business call just now—said Mrs. Bamberger wasn't in any condition to talk to anybody." Clay had a fleeting moment's wonder as to what it meant, and then his mind went to something else. "But I guess I'll take a chance."

When Clay came out he was driving the car, and in a moment dashed triumphantly beneath the winking sign, and flew upstairs to his companions.

"I got it!" he exclaimed.

"You get what you go after, don't you?" said Chi-Chi. "That's the kind of man I like—the go-getter."

Clay paid a fresh accumulation of bills, and in a few minutes the four were in the car speeding up the street.

"This is fine," Chi-Chi remarked. "We'll make a night of it. I don't mind telling you now I almost had you bounced when you pulled that soft stuff on me. But

there was something about you — well, I pride myself on being able to tell a *real* man when I see him."

She leaned against him. "I'm glad now I didn't pass you up, aren't you?"

He felt her soft, fluttering fingers on his face.

"I sure am," Clay declared as he steered his way in and out among the medley of speeding cars. "I think you're just dandy," he added.

He could hear Sam in the rear seat going through the process of "fussing 'em." Sam was in a high spirit of laughing and giggling, and his tongue was quick with what he considered killing remarks. His arm was around Babe, and Clay heard the sound of kisses.

On such occasions Sam liked to ask conundrums, and Clay could hear him propounding one:

"Well, then, see if you can guess this here one. Why is a kiss over the telephone like a straw hat, Babe?" for they were now Babe and Sam to each other.

"I don't know, Sam. Why is it?"

"Because it's not felt," replied Sam, and there was a squeaking of laughter. "Give me what I am thinking of, Babe," said Sam, and there was another moist *plop* as an aftermath of his wit.

Clay wished he could make such progress, but something gripped him and held him back—he did not know what it was. Deeply and earnestly he coveted Sam's dash.

Chi-Chi was now snuggled against him.

"I know a place on the way where we can stop in," she said. "A man there knows me, and we can get a little cheer. Are you for it or against it, Mr. Gruber?" she called over her shoulder.

"I'm for it," whooped Sam. "What is it, anyhow?"

IX

CHI-CHI directed the way, and they came to a road house where a number of cars waited, some with chauffeurs in uniform. When they came up a door man bounced out to meet them. They went inside and seated themselves at tables, and waiters came with cards, while Chi-Chi's eyes moved about restlessly.

"Here's the man who knows me," she announced, and beckoned to an assistant floor manager. There were whispered words, and in a moment sandwiches were

brought, and then what Clay thought were small coffee cups.

"Didn't I tell you I had a friend?" Chi-Chi demanded, and Clay smelled the liquor. He had never tasted hard drink more than once or twice in his life, and could not understand why anybody wished to swallow the nauseating stuff, but now it was different—the spirit of adventure, the dash of the two girls, Sam's great confidence, the music.

Chi-Chi lifted the cup, jewels sparkling on her fingers, which adornment to Clay's inexperienced eyes looked beautiful and genuine.

"Here's to a bumper corn crop," she said, and the liquor went down.

What was the proper thing to say? Clay wondered, and a great desire came over him to know what to say on such occasions. What a woman of the world Chi-Chi was, he thought, and he—what an infant!

He must say something. At last he got it out:

"Here's to two bumper crops—and some wheat and barley and oats, too."

He swallowed the fiery fluid. The burning, terrible stuff almost choked him, and he yearned to take a drink of water; but maybe that shouldn't be done. He tried to smile.

"That's the real thing," he said, appraisingly, gamely.

"By hickity," gasped Sam, "it's got a kick that 'd make a mule look like a grasshopper!" And he rubbed the spot where he thought the drink had lodged. "About two shots of that and I'd think I was a mule myself. *Hee! Haw!*" Sam gave a startling imitation of that unfortunate creature.

Chi-Chi and Babe wanted more to drink, and all the time they were watching Clay and Sam.

"Let's blow on to the real place I was telling you about," said Chi-Chi, and Clay called for the bill. He was staggered at the amount, but he must pretend that it was nothing. And so he flipped the bills out carelessly. Even though he had to pay for it, there was for the moment a buoyant, satisfying feeling in being such a man of the world.

"Sam," he managed to whisper, as they were going out to the car, "I got to have some money. Let me have what you got."

Sam found a wrinkled bill or two.

"Don't worry," said Sam. "Have a

good time while you can. You ain't fussing 'em any. Don't you see how I'm getting along?"

X

THE four got into the car, and Clay started the engine.

"Let's rest a minute," Chi-Chi commanded, and, wriggling her shoulders in imitation of a dance, she began snapping her fingers and humming the words of the jazz tune they had just heard. She touched Clay, and then drew away again. His arms hungered to go around her, and in imagination he vividly felt the clinging contact of her lips. A thrill ran over him.

"God, wouldn't it be wonderful?" he said to himself.

He felt her warm suppleness against his side, and his heart raced madly.

"Look at 'em, look at 'em!" bellowed Sam. "We mustn't let 'em get ahead of us, Babe. Her head's on his shoulder. Come to papa."

"Oh, Sam, you thrill me so!" came a stifled voice.

"That's me," said Sam. "I ain't surprised at myself at all."

"I think you're just wonderful," said Chi-Chi to Clay. "You're so handsome. I'd rather dance with you than Valentino any time."

Clay trembled at the compliment. How splendid it was to be appreciated.

"I think you are wonderful, too," he said. "Just wonderful."

"Do you, really? Now I'm going to give you the best kiss I have."

She leaned against him heavily, and Clay smelled the odor of her breath. It was alcoholic—that was to be expected.

But what shocked him was the fact that he was reminded of a certain drunken, over-demonstrative farm hand back home. Chi-Chi's breath wasn't girl-like.

In his sudden panic he obeyed the flight instinct by starting the flivver. Its forward lurch freed him of the girl's clasp, and she shrieked in amusement at what she thought was his careless driving.

"Just for that you'll have to wait until we get to the real knockout place," said Chi-Chi, and, as they drove along, from time to time her hand played in his hair.

But now there was no thrill for Clay; the smell of the liquor, the suggestive stories she told, her high, hiccuping laughter. It became more and more distasteful to him,

but it was what the other young men did when they were out sporting; he must pretend that he liked it.

There were only a few cars on the road, mostly large, closed ones, speeding toward them. As they approached they seemed to glide steadily and noiselessly—black creatures speeding silently through the night—but as they came closer there was a slight swaying, a purring, then a growing *zzz-hh*—a roaring, a rush of air, and they had flashed by.

Clay caught glimpses of couples with their arms wrapped around each other, or sitting in each other's laps, unseeing, uncaring. They were the mysterious, speeding, unknown cars of the late hours. Now and then one read about them in the papers—crashes, wrecks, current beauties of the stage, sons of millionaires—lawsuits—settlements.

What an exciting world it was! Clay liked to think that he was part of it, but the feeling was steadily growing in him that he wanted to be out of this affair. The smelly breath at his shoulder, and the spooning of Babe and Sam were palling on him, and the first exhilaration of his own liquor was wearing off. At moments he felt slightly sleepy.

XI

THEY turned into the road house which Chi-Chi had chosen. It was far more pretentious than the other, and around it were a number of large closed cars. Chauffeurs stood in darkened places, talking and smoking; now and then a laugh arose.

"I can fix it up here, too, I think," said Chi-Chi, and disappeared inside. "It's all right," she announced as she came back.

Clay had the sense of seeing, as they entered, a gay room with many lights, waiters coming and going, a cleared space in the middle of the floor. A few couples were dancing, an orchestra was playing a wild, haunting oriental selection; bare shoulders moved, gleamed; diamonds flashed glinting lights. Clay had the sinking knowledge that it was a most expensive place, and he longed to slip out, but it was too late.

"By hickity!" breathed Sam heavily into Clay's ear as they moved down a path of tables. "They sure put on dog here."

"I kinda worked up an appetite," said Chi-Chi. "That's what a ride does to a fellow."

Chi-Chi liked to give herself and her girl

friends such titles as "fellow," "sport," and "us boys."

Clay had hold of the menu card, and his worst fears were fulfilled as he glanced at it. Pretending to be laughing and talking, his eyes flew down the price list—and his heart sickened. He flashed a warning look at Sam.

"We had such a big supper that I don't feel very hungry myself," he said.

But Sam, unaware of the prices, felt no such hesitation.

"You can lay off if you want to, but I'm going to throw in something filling," he asserted genially. "What they got to-night, anyway?"

"We'll get something to give Mr. Swan an appetite," giggled Chi-Chi from the mirth inspired by her drinks. "Waiter, I got something in my eye."

She winked humorously, and the waiter moved away. In a few minutes he was back with four small coffee cups.

"Here's to more corn," said Chi-Chi, and lifted her cup. "Only I like rye better."

"Say, that's good," declared Babe. "Ring up a full fare."

She went through the motions of a conductor pulling his rope.

Sam laughed with loud appreciation, for it took little now to excite Sam's sense of humor.

"This isn't buying the baby a shirt," said Chi-Chi, leaning her shoulder heavily against Clay. "Why not make it a lobster party?"

Clay had never eaten a lobster in his life, and only once or twice had he seen them lying dully on a block of ice in a restaurant window, now and then giving a faint, almost imperceptible movement. He was more accustomed to the word used humorously in reference to people, and now he thought it had to do with that.

"Sure, all right," he said, and in turn leaned heavily against Chi-Chi.

"At last the arctic zone's beginning to warm up a little," said Chi-Chi, and moved nearer him. "Waitah, waitah, we'll start with a round of lobster. Let joy be unredefined, fellow sports!"

From time to time Chi-Chi quoted the line, for when she found something she liked she repeated it over and over.

Clay realized now what the order meant, and grew cold, for running through his mind was the sickening question—would he

have money enough to pay? But he must pretend that he was having a wonderful time.

"Sure," he repeated, "let it be unredefined as the very devil."

"Getting still warmer," Chi-Chi remarked, her eyes flying to Babe.

The waiters answered the calls and made it easy for the girls to order the most expensive things. More food was brought, and there were more drinks, while Clay tried to pretend that he was merry, but more and more ardently he wished to be out of the mess. He tried to laugh and joke in a brave effort to be blasé, and gulped down the nauseating drinks.

His feeling of sleepiness had passed; in its place was a slight whirling of the head with a growing dull beating at his temples. Now and then he laughed suddenly and with a great effort at glee.

"Still warmer," said Chi-Chi.

"That's what I call eating," Sam declared, as he poised a mushroom on his fork. "Only I used to call 'em toadstools. Good-by, little froggie."

"He's sure the witty boy," said Babe. "Does 'ou love daddy's little baby-aby?"

"Sure," returned Sam. "Buss me, Babe, buss me."

Babe kissed him resoundingly.

"They're getting away ahead of us," Chi-Chi said, and threw her arms heavily around Clay's neck. He ardently wished to be away. "Put your arms around me tight, Clay, and give me the best you've got."

"But the people are looking at us," Clay protested.

"What of it? They've all probably done it themselves."

She drew Clay's arms about her. Again he felt the desire to be out of it all.

"Not now, Chi-Chi," he protested, stubbornly turning aside his head.

The meal continued.

"Excuse me a minute," said Sam after a time, "I got to powder up." Arising, he moved uneasily down the row of tables.

"Me, too," said Clay, and fell into step after him.

"How about it, Sam," he inquired in the wash room. "Haven't you any more money?"

Sam searched his pockets, unsteadily.

"Yeh, I got a quarter. Why, you running short?"

"We can't begin to pay for our dinner—

and there's the rent of the car. What are we going to do? They'll probably have us arrested."

At the word arrested, Sam's wandering attention became focused.

"By hickity! Would they? What 'll we do? I—I wish we was out of here."

Clay looked out the opening onto the road.

"Let's go," he said. "Some day, when we have the money, we'll come back and pay them."

XII

IN a few moments they were out on the street, bareheaded. Clay inserted the key, the self-starter groaned, there was a *chuck-chuck*, the car throbbed, and they went flying down the road. A face appeared at the window of the road house, then the waiters came to the door. The manager rushed to the telephone.

Clay and Sam met few cars; only now and then one flew by with a sudden whining roar. The electric lights on the poles arose and fell rhythmically.

The two came into town; there were more people on the streets, now and then lone, mysterious couples with their arms around each other. The two passed Dance-land. The sign no longer shone, the little light no longer ran around the border, and the great hall was silent.

They drew up at the car agency.

The clerk opened the little window sleepily, then stared in surprise at the two bare, tousled heads.

"Checking in, are you?"

"Yes," said Clay.

With a flash light the clerk read the mileage indicator, consulted a typewritten table under a glass on the counter, and announced the charge.

They had enough to pay the bill, and then catching a street car they started home.

As they approached Mrs. Bamberger's rooming house, Clay began to feel a curious sense of uneasiness. There were lights all over the house, something quite unheard of, and in front of the house two policemen were talking in low tones. Clay's heart beat wildly—what could this mean? Inside, men moved about, and there was the tread of heavy shoes.

As they started in, one of the policemen stopped them.

"Where are you going?"

"In here," Clay told him.

"Who are you?"

Clay gave him their names.

"Do you live here?"

"We have a room here," Clay explained.

"What are you doing out this time of night?" the officer asked. And then he glanced at their bare heads. "Where have you been?"

Clay hesitated.

"To a dance."

"Say, what's the matter?" chattered Sam. "Is there anything gone wrong?"

The officer turned to his fellow patrolman. "Pretty question, ain't it?" Then he answered Clay and Sam: "Just a fatal shooting—that's all. It means out all night for us."

Other men—Clay began to realize they were detectives in plain clothes—came up. And then he heard the name Stein, and in the confusion realized that Stein had been murdered.

A sergeant began to question them. Where had they been? What time had they left? When had they seen Stein last? Did he speak to them?

There was a growing sound, and speeding toward them came an officer on a motor cycle, evidently searching for house numbers. Drawing up, he saluted.

"I'm trailing a couple of birds that have been having a high old time at a road house," he explained. "This is the address they gave at the car agency. What you got there?" He indicated the bareheaded youths.

There were half audible whisperings and a buzz of voices while Clay felt the men staring at him and Sam. Then the officers moved toward them.

"Do these look like 'em?"

The motorcycle officer flashed a light.

"Yes, they check up."

There was another deep buzzing while the officers conferred, the men turning from time to time to look toward the room where Stein had lived, then back to Clay and Sam.

The sergeant stepped up to the boys.

"You'd better come along," he said.

XIII

THE two were led away, and as Clay was put in his cell he had the confused, bitter sense of beholding men in endless rows of similar cells. Sometimes the men stood dejectedly at the door, or sometimes they

stood up with their hands grasped in the grating like monkeys in their cages.

He could hear the sharp, metallic sound of life going on in the prison—the grit of nails in shoe heels on the unyielding steel; keys turning in locks, the clank of doors being shut. Men appeared, disappeared; two officers passed with a new prisoner; one officer had his hand gripped in the man's collar, while the other held his club ready for instant use.

The man was crying and shrieking unintelligible words; a door was opened and he was popped in. Then came the abrupt drowning of his cries—a padded cell.

Clay reproached himself bitterly. Oh, the utter humiliation of it—in prison! How terrible prison had always seemed, and now he was being held on the charge of murder. His mind went over and over the unending line of "ifs"—*if* he hadn't run away from home; *if* he hadn't gone to the dance; *if* they hadn't met those girls; *if* Stein hadn't been murdered.

A few doors farther along Sam was in a similar cell, looking out upon the same scene.

Sam squeaked:

"You still there, Clay? Don't let 'em take you any place without yelling out to me. I wish I had my father."

But it lasted only two days. There were telegrams to Junction City, verification, and then in the underworld, Eddie the Dude and two of his kind were arrested, after the manner of the police, which consists of arresting everybody available. At last, Clay and Sam were free again.

"I'm going straight home," said Sam, "and I'll bet Chicago 'll never see me again. I'm through with this here town."

Clay's father met them when they arrived in Junction City, and soon they were speeding out over the long road they had walked that night with their suit cases.

"I'll bet you it's going to be a long time before I go away again," Sam declared.

"I want to see my pa. He appreciates me. Let's hurry."

"I want to stop and see Mr. Kelly a minute," said Clay's father, as they came in sight of the Kelly homestead.

As the car drew up before the house there was a welcoming shout from the Kelly family. What a merry, live family the Kellys were; what good times they seemed to have together, Clay thought.

"Come on in and let us have a look at you," called Mrs. Kelly, and as Clay and Sam went in there was a merry hubbub of welcome. Soon the family gathered around Sam in the sitting room as he told of their exploits in Chicago—that is, all gathered around him except Clay and Kitty. They found themselves alone in the parlor.

XIV

NEVER had Kitty looked so blooming as now; how wonderful she was in comparison to the two painted girls of the dance hall. What a sweet and splendid person she was—so far above him. There was a slight ringing in Clay's ears, and he kept opening and shutting his hands trying to think of something to say. It was strange how hard words were to find.

"I'm so glad to see you—that jail in Chicago must have been horrible, you poor boy," said Kitty.

Suddenly, Clay's heart leaped up and turned over, for Kitty had thrown her round arms about his neck, and Clay felt a warm, stimulating sweetness upon his lips—a paralyzing, electrifying sensation more wonderful, more holy than anything he had ever dreamed of.

But it was only for a moment—a stolen, deliriously happy moment—and then the family was upon them.

In a few minutes Clay and Sam were again in the car, and as they sped away Clay knew that he would never tell Sam of the wonderful, the amazing, the sacred thing that had at last happened to him.

TO A MOTH

POOR, foolish, weak, enamored thing—

How could you know

The lovely light that lured you so

Would sear your wing?

Lena Whittaker Blakeney

Lamb Pie and the Dog Catcher

THIS STORY REVOLVES AROUND A POOR DOG AND A RICH MAN, EACH A GENTLEMAN ANY READER WOULD LIKE TO MEET

By Ruth Campbell

I SHALL," said Mrs. Jones in her best club manner, "make Janet a dancer."

"*Vraiment?*" remarked Mr. Jones, who had once taken a business trip to Paris, and thought this word an improvement on "really," its English equivalent.

"Yes, indeed, *vraiment*," Mrs. Jones assured him.

She had been a bit bewildered at first by her husband's easy use of French, but, having provided herself with a dictionary and a teacher, had learned in two short months the various words which Mr. Jones interjected in his English, and found to her delight that she could employ them with a facile if somewhat varied pronunciation.

She liked the idea of using them, too. It gave strangers the impression that she and Mr. Jones could carry on a complete conversation in French, if they were not delicately reluctant to display their knowledge. Now, having used "*vraiment*" with such success, she found courage to go on.

"A danseuse," she added smugly. It sounded more like "dance sauce" to Mr. Jones, but who was he to criticize? He replied merely with raised eyebrows.

"Not toe," the mother of Janet went on. "They do say it splits 'em awfully."

"It might."

"But one of those Grecian dancers. I think they are just sweet. The president of our club gave a talk on that kind of dancing. She said Isadora Duncan looked like an ode to a Grecian urn. No! That wasn't the time. That urn came on the program when we had poets' day. The president must have said that Miss Duncan

looked like something or other on a vase. Oh! I remember! It was a Wedgwood figure on something shaped a bit like a Grecian urn."

"You get so much from your club programs," Mr. Jones remarked.

His wife gave him a hard look and went on: "Well, anyway, that is the kind of a dancer I am going to make of Janet."

"But Isadora Duncan gallops," protested the father of Janet, and then, looking out of the window, he added truthfully, "and so does Janet."

Janet did. She was going around the house now in long, easy strides, like a thoroughbred warming up in morning practice on the track. She was followed by a small brother, who stumbled along behind, crying lustily:

"Way-ut, I say! You meaney Janet! Way-ut! Those dogs are mine as much as they are yours."

"Call 'em away, then," taunted Janet.

"I don't care, you're a hateful old thing. You know I can't," the small brother protested. "Every time I get a dog, he's yours by the end of a week. You might wait now and let me hold a stick, too. Just because your old legs are longer—" The remainder was lost to the parents, who did not feel that they were missing much.

Mrs. Jones had been deciding upon the careers for her two children since their birth. When Janet's little red head first showed from her crib, Mrs. Jones began planning a career for her.

Five years later, Bobby came to occupy the discarded crib of Janet, and Mrs. Jones

promptly arranged a life for him. True, these careers changed as the years went on, and according to the latest lecturer at the club, or the last artist to appear in public in Middleton.

Thus by turns Bobby became a Senator, a missionary, a violinist, a writer, while Janet was at different times a singer, an actress, a worker for the Near East Relief. These changing plans bothered the two children not at all.

Right now they were engaged in one of their frequent altercations, and, as usual, over their dogs.

Mrs. Jones sighed as she glanced out at her treasures.

"Sometimes I wish Janet were not such a tomboy," she confessed. "Those dogs, always at her heels. Her hair slicked back and braided when other little girls have short curly hair."

"I like those big, thick braids," Mr. Jones declared. "I don't want her to be like all the little simp girls in town. Janet is natural, even if she is a tomboy. She'll grow out of that soon enough."

"But the dogs. So many of them, and she's always bringing a stray one home," Mrs. Jones continued.

"I've put a stop to that," the father of Janet boasted. "I told her I wouldn't have another pup on the place, and I won't! I said, 'Look here, young lady, this dog-catching business has got'—"

He was interrupted by the young lady herself, who dashed into the room with a collie puppy hanging to her short skirts and a fox terrier jumping at a stick she held in her hand.

"Daddy—" she began.

"No!" exploded her father. "You may not have it!"

Janet's eyes assumed a look of bewildered innocence.

"Have what?" she questioned.

"Another dog," her father answered impatiently. "A dog, a pup, a hound, a collie—anything that walks on four legs and wags a tail. You may not! Do you hear me, and is it clear?"

"Who said anything about a dog?" Janet retorted scornfully.

"It's always a dog, and if it isn't, what is it?" Mr. Jones shouted.

Janet not wanting a dog was a new Janet, and although he knew he was treading on dangerous ground, curiosity was getting the better of him.

"It's a bear; a darling little woolly cub, with darling little paws—" Janet began.

At that glad news a startling change came over Mrs. Jones. She had been filling a rocking chair, erect in her support of her husband; but now it was as if a lighter grade of steam roller had passed over her. She flattened out and emitted a series of gasps. Not so Mr. Jones. With a muffled howl he rose to his feet.

"A cub!" he echoed. "A darling little woolly cub—with darling little paws!" He choked and ran a finger around the inside of his collar. For a second he sputtered, and then the words came again. "A darling little woolly—" A vein in his forehead stood out in purple splendor, and his cheeks became inflated somewhat like little red balloons.

"When you make those funny faces you look like the pictures I draw on the telephone book when I'm waiting for Central to answer," Janet told him irrelevantly.

Mr. Jones became apoplectic. "A cub! A darned smelly, ugly cub!" he yelled.

"He isn't," Janet defended. "He's been lovely ever since he got here."

Mrs. Jones gave a slight scream. "Got here!" she shrieked.

"Yes," replied her imperturbable daughter, with a shrug.

"Oh, ye gods!" cried her father. "A bear is not a household pet. Do you understand me, or are you deliberately trying to appear stupid?"

Janet eyed him coldly. A flush spread over her face, and her young mouth was drawn with a slight scorn. "You should have told me all this before I bought him," she remarked.

Her choleric father made a noise like a cackling hen.

"Because," continued the young lady smoothly, "I've already paid for him. I used my birthday money. You said I could spend it any way I wished if I didn't buy another dog, and I promised. You didn't mention bears, did you?"

"I never thought of bears," whispered her stricken parent.

"So I kept my promise," Janet triumphed. "And now you and mother have to keep yours. You gave your word about that birthday money, and you can't go back on it."

And having lit the short fuse to her bomb, she swept from the room with her red braids flying after her.

Mrs. Jones returned with interest the dig about her club.

"It takes a father to bring children to time," she said sweetly.

II

At fifteen Janet gave promise of great beauty, but none whatever of being a dancer, although she tried. Upon being urged by a perspiring teacher to put more abandon into her art, she had suddenly launched into a pirouette, and landed under the piano with a twisted wrist and a howl of rage. After that she refused point-blank to try another pirouette.

"You can teach me dances without whirls," she announced sullenly, and thudded through an allegory of spring and a bacchanal with a set and determined expression and a wooden attitude.

"But ze smile," expostulated the worried teacher. "You forget always ze pleased expression."

"I'm not pleased," Janet informed him. "I promised mother I'd dance, but nothing was said about being pleased over it, and I'm just not going to smile."

She did once, however. That was when her small and rebellious brother was pressed into a duet by the united efforts of mother and teacher. Dressed as a faun, he was dragged to a pedestal and given a bunch of grapes.

This he held forth temptingly to his dancing sister with an expression of diabolical hatred on his face. His attitude was that of a jungle animal brought to bay, while Janet galloped about him, for the first time pleased with her parentally chosen profession.

At seventeen the dancing was given up, but the girl's beauty went on. Mrs. Jones was proud of the latter, and tearful over the discarded art.

"I give up; it was money wasted," she wailed. "Janet hasn't a particle of interest in dancing."

"She hasn't any interest in anything but animals, and dogs mostly," agreed the father. "This place has been a home for stray dogs ever since she was old enough to toddle out on the street and collect them."

"But she has always done well in her school work," Mrs. Jones defended.

"Yes, and why? Because we threatened to take her animals away from her if she didn't," Mr. Jones snorted.

"Anyway, whatever the cause, you'll

have to admit she has always been a good student. She likes books and study."

"She'll probably make a fine veterinary," her father said bitterly.

Janet was twenty and unimpressed when she met Warren Ware.

Warren was twenty-seven and deeply impressed when he met Janet.

"I adored you when I first set eyes on you two days ago. Will you marry me?" he asked.

Janet answered him shyly. "How can you be sure you love me after knowing me only two days? And as for marrying you, I don't know. I haven't made up my mind."

"I'm sure about loving you, all right," Warren replied. He took her in his arms and kissed her astonished lips. "I will always adore you, too. We are going to be married in a month."

Mr. and Mrs. Jones could not have been more pleased with their son-in-law elect if he had been made to order, but Mr. Jones felt that they should tell him about Janet's embarrassing fondness for animals. He tried to break it gently.

"Janet is awfully good to animals; sometimes she has almost too many pets around the house," he began tentatively.

Warren laughed him down. "If Janet likes animals she shall have a zoo when we are married. You tell me that as if it were a fault instead of one more proof of her beautiful character."

"Well," said Mr. Jones lamely, "I just happened to mention it."

But Bobby was not so tactful.

"Heck!" he said to his sister's fiancé. "Whadda you want to marry her for? She's nothin' but a dog catcher."

III

THE wedding was the usual ceremony of an important person in a small town. There were beautiful gifts from old friends of the family, and Warren's relatives, whom Janet had not met, and the orthodox representation from the social two hundred.

The items included a carpet sweeper, bridge table covers, a green glass set, solid silver plates ranging in size from butter to bread, hand hammered copper flower jars, books, a bead bag, and checks. The money tokens pleased Janet frankly, as she liked to plan extravagant little touches in the new home, but Warren was delighted with everything. According to his lights every

gift was a tribute to the beauty and popularity of his Janet, a goddess properly appreciated. But he hid shy at a vicious red lamp with a wicked red shade, sent by Aunt Caroline.

"It's pretty bad, isn't it?" he offered.

"Terrible," Janet agreed.

"We can give it away," Warren said, as all bridegrooms have said before him.

"But we can't," answered Janet, as all brides have answered before her. "Aunt Caroline will be coming to see us, and I wouldn't hurt her for worlds."

They had been married two months when Warren, returning from a day at the office, was met at his home with a distinct shock. As was his habit, he turned the knob softly, swung the door in gently, and called: "Hello! Who's home?"

The reply was prompt and startling. A huge, yellowish thing came sailing through the air and hit him on the chest. He sat down with a disagreeable jar, and the yellow thing sat on him. A long, red and enthusiastic tongue ran up and down his face.

"Janet!" Warren shouted. "What the deuce is this?"

Janet appeared in the hall. "Isn't he a darling? He's Lamb Pie."

Warren pushed at the joyful thing that would play.

"Go away!" he begged. "Go away, Veal Loaf, go away!"

Janet dragged the creature off and Warren got up.

"He's a masterly little thing," he said, looking at the awkward fawn colored dog that strained to get at him again. "Where did you find him?"

"He found me. I was walking down by the freight yards, and he pounced at me and asked if we had a little doggie in our home, and could he come to live with us. A family down there said that he had been around since that wreck three weeks ago."

Lamb Pie scratched wildly at his itching stomach.

"Fleas?" asked Warren.

"Mange," Janet assured him brightly, "but not bad. I can cure it. I've cured hundreds of cases."

Lamb Pie shook a huge head.

"He isn't going to play with me again?"

Warren inquired anxiously.

"No, that's just a little inflammation in his ear. Fortunately I got him in time."

"Yes, isn't it?" Warren agreed dryly. "Did the wreck cut his ears in that manner, do you suppose?"

Janet favored her husband with a disdainful look.

"They are beautifully cut," she announced. "That's one reason why I know he is so good."

"If his head were cut off, would he be better?"

"Don't be foolish. When this Great Dane gets his growth he is going to be a wonder."

"When he gets his growth!" Warren's voice was a stricken whisper. "Janet! He's much too large now for domestic purposes. He just isn't going to be useful at all if he grows much more."

"He is already useful," Janet said proudly. "He hadn't been in the house ten minutes before he broke Aunt Caroline's lamp."

"Nice doggie," said Warren.

IV

LAMB PIE's appetite was most gratifying, and he grew accordingly. Janet and Warren loved the great awkward beast, although there were times when he sank deep in the mire of disgrace. One of these occasions was when the Wares were dining for the first time with a bride and groom newly arrived in the suburb.

"Do take dinner with us informally tomorrow evening," the little bride wrote.

Janet's reply read:

We'd love to come, and thank you. Thursday, then, at six thirty, we'll arrive, with lard on our hair and our ears pinned back.

And Lamb Pie went, too.

As Janet and Warren entered proudly at the front door, he entered stealthily via the back door, and while talk was being made in the hall, hay was being made in the kitchen. The little bride returning to her mutton, found it under the table in charge of Lamb Pie, who growlingly asserted its ownership and finish.

The social atmosphere at once became slightly strained. Warren was frankly in favor of having Lamb Pie prepared in place of the lost leg of lamb, and the forlorn hostess tearfully welcomed the suggestion, but Janet saved the day.

"We have a baked ham at home," she announced cheerfully. "It is stuck full of cloves, and covered with brown sugar. It's

hot, too. I took it out of the cooker just before we left. Warren will run home and get it."

"Warren won't!" said that individual. "It's a two-mile jaunt, and it's raining hard."

But Janet ignored him, and beamed at the embarrassed bridegroom.

"You take him in hand; I'm simply no good at managing men," she stated inaccurately. "I'll stay here and help with the rest of the dinner, and we'll have it all ready the very minute you return."

"Hurry, now," she finished sweetly, and under the spell of her smile, the bridegroom accepted the wet walk willingly, and went off, dragging Warren with him.

Warren, in turn, dragged Lamb Pie, and found pleasure in giving him some solid cuffs on the side of his head; but Lamb Pie, with the taste of tender roast still clinging to his chops, considered the whole affair in the light of achievement rather than misdemeanor, and directly the cuffs were over, rewarded his irate master with many wags and gambols.

"That wife of yours is a wonder," said the bridegroom as they sloshed through the rain. "Think of her thinking of the ham."

"I am," Warren answered enigmatically.

But even Janet's charm could not always gloss over the playful ways of Lamb Pie, at which times she cleverly resorted to silence, or a light and tuneful humming which should pass the minutes of Warren's wrath and restore Lamb Pie to favor.

One cold, sleety day in midwinter, Warren's alarm clock failed to function, and he, waking a half hour after the usual time, plunged into his clothes and rushed down to the furnace. Janet followed sleepily, and put on the coffee and made toast and scrambled eggs while he wrestled with the furnace.

"It's out!" he howled from the basement, and then began the angry shaking down of clinkers.

"Wouldn't you know it would act this way to-day of all days? It is the one morning of the month when I have to be in the office on time," he raged, coming up the stairs with his hair full of gray dust. "I have twenty minutes to eat and catch that train, and no bus to the station. I get awfully fed up on this suburban stuff along about February."

"But it is lovely in the spring," Janet said absently. She was wondering how

long she would have to wait for the first robin's song, and when she could begin the long rambles with Lamb Pie in the country again. She, too, was fed up on the long winter, but did not consider this the time to say so.

Ten minutes later Warren faced the sleet and started for the station. He had gone a half block when he heard loud and joyous yelps, and with a tail winding a happy circle, and paws off the ground at every leap, Lamb Pie rushed on him from behind.

"Go back!" Warren said firmly, and Lamb Pie stopped.

"Do you hear? Go back!" Warren repeated with a rising note of irritation.

Lamb Pie lay down and thudded a hopeful tail on the ground.

Warren looked at him for a minute, and then started on. "He seems to understand," he thought to himself. "Perhaps he is actually going to mind."

But the patter of stealthy feet behind proved otherwise.

Warren whirled and took ten steps toward Lamb Pie, who stopped and wagged his tail tentatively.

"Get out of here!" Warren shouted. "Go home! Go on, now!" He started for the dog, who turned and trotted back a few steps and looked over his shoulder.

Warren made a gesture. Lamb Pie considered it, and found it of little value, and faced his master again. Warren picked up a futile bit of snow and threw it. Lamb Pie lay down with his head on his paws and considered some more.

The train whistle blew, and Warren started to run. This was great! Lamb Pie broke into a joyous gallop. His master was going to be playful. This was a little out of the ordinary, but Lamb Pie was willing to overlook that, and be a party to any entertainment offered. He bounded up and down at Warren's side, now, and found to his astonishment an angry hand grasping his collar.

"Darn you! Go home!" shouted Warren, and Lamb Pie slunk back and left a hurt look over his shoulder. He walked away ten feet and lay down again. His eyes said that while all of this was most unreasonable, he was willing to forget it in case his master wished to reconsider.

Warren didn't. He picked up a stick and started after the dog. Lamb Pie arose to his feet hurriedly and covered another twenty feet, and lay down again. Warren

threw the stick. It landed a yard from Lamb Pie, who looked at it scornfully, and gained his feet promptly as his master rushed for the train.

V

WARREN made the last coach as it pulled out, and Lamb Pie made it, too. He jumped, and swung with his toenails sticking frantically into the steps, his hind legs hanging off, and his ears flattened with terror.

For a moment Warren's heart was in his mouth. Then he caught the dog by the collar and pulled him up the steps to the platform.

Lamb Pie crouched down and shook. His eyes rolled at the fast moving vacancy behind him, and he pressed against Warren's legs and whined.

Warren dragged him into the coach, with Lamb Pie too terrified to move his own legs. The scuffling entrance received the attention it deserved, for on the car were Warren's golfing friends, three of them, good men and true.

For months they had tried diligently to get his goat on the links, but his good nature had never given way before their attacks, and here was the chance of a lifetime. One look at his angry face, and the dog he dragged behind him like a wardrobe trunk, was enough. They sensed the situation at once, and arose to the occasion without delay.

"What is it?" one howled joyfully. "And why does it follow so lovingly?"

Warren pushed the limp and unresisting body of Lamb Pie into a seat.

"This dog-goned dog followed me," he began, but was met with shouts of derision.

"Not really?"

"Did he come all the way as willingly? Some devosh!"

Bob Shores quoted:

"Perfect passion and worship fed,
By kick in ribs or pat on head."

Warren smiled a twisted smile and sank into the seat. His heart still thumped unaccountably at the thought of the danger Lamb Pie had been in. True, he was properly mad at the brute for following him, but one couldn't see a dog killed before one's eyes. And Janet? What would she have said?

John Thew leaned across the aisle.

"Look here, Old Top," he began, bur-

lesquely confidential. "I don't know whether you know it or not, but lap dogs are not considered good form for men, and moreover, they are not allowed on this train."

This crude wit brought another laugh from the imbeciles around, but Warren tried another smile, which even he felt was a bit sickly.

Bob Shores held up a warning finger.

"And when the cruel conductor comes through, he's going to tell you to take that doggie right off," he admonished seriously.

As bad luck would have it, the conductor that morning was a new man on the run.

"Here, what are you doing with that dog in here? Don't you know anything?" he demanded.

One of Warren's pet detestations was an official of any kind who began an argument with an inquiry as to the state of a man's mentality. He was feeling none too sweet, anyway, under the gibes of his friends, and this was a last straw.

"I brought him along for a rubber of bridge," he replied calmly.

The conductor stared at him with angry eyes, the red mounting slowly in his cheeks.

"Well, the game's over," he announced grimly. "Put him off."

"Where?" asked Warren with equal grimness.

"Put him off! Do you hear?" the conductor repeated, his voice higher and his face redder.

This was pie for Warren's friends. "Yes, little boy, lay him to one side," and "Hold him out of the window," they suggested helpfully.

Now the conductor was a man who revered an order as an order. To break it because it was more reasonable to do so than to follow it, was to him an unheard of thing. This individual case was ruled by an order, and an official who was not officious was no good.

"The game's over, put him off," he repeated stubbornly.

Warren looked at the scenery whisking by. "Where?" he asked again.

"I don't care where you put him," the conductor shouted, "but he can't stay on this train."

"He can't get off at the rate it is going now," Warren shouted back at him.

The conductor grabbed Lamb Pie's collar, and Lamb Pie, glad to have any attention after the silence of his sullen master,

licked hopefully around at the hand that held him.

"Get your hands off that dog," Warren ordered. While he still ached to give Lamb Pie a good beating, it was, after all, his own affair, and no conductor had a right to try to throw a dog from a moving train.

"Then you get him off the car," the conductor retorted.

"You blasted fool!" Warren raged. "Do you think I would throw a valuable dog like this from a moving train? A train that is moving— I wouldn't even throw a dog that wasn't worth anything from a train that was moving. A train—" He stopped, feeling silly, and knowing that he would be unmercifully roasted about the whole affair later.

"Look here," he said finally, trying to keep his temper, "I didn't bring that brute along because I wanted him. He followed me onto the train."

"He'd no right," said the conductor brilliantly.

"He hadn't," agreed Warren, "but as long as he is here, he is here," he finished with a brilliance equal to the official's.

"A masterly and convincing argument," approved one of his friends.

"Oh, shut up!" answered Warren, turning his back on them.

The conductor gave a hesitating glance at the dog. "As I said, it ain't according to rules."

"You go to hell!" Warren told him, and got behind a magazine. Lamb Pie put a hopeful paw on his knee. "And you, too!" added his disgusted master.

The conductor made an uncertain motion with his hands.

"Oh, let the nice little boy have his playmate," Bob Shores advised, and the conductor, glad to get out of the picture gracefully, faded down the aisle.

If the train entrance was trying, the office entrance was doubly so, and by that time Warren was in a fine temper. He had thought something of parking Lamb Pie in the baggage room until the five fifteen left, but decided against it as further delaying his arrival at the office.

And so, with his unbelted belt slipped through the dog's collar, he swung onto a street car, Lamb Pie clambering after as gracefully as he had made the train. The car started, and came to a sudden stop.

"No dogs allowed," said the conductor.

"Not even on the platform?"

"No."

"I am only going a few blocks," Warren lied meekly.

"Then you can easily walk 'em," suggested the conductor, and Warren dragged Lamb Pie off.

VI

As a leash dog in a city, Lamb Pie was a distinct failure. He took the opposite sides of all poles and pedestrians, and kept Warren in a nimble fury of disentanglement. At the first crossing he flattened out under the wheels of an on-coming car, and only the stanch leather of the belt saved him from an untimely end. Warren almost pulled his arm out with that wrench.

Then Lamb Pie saw an arrogant Peke on the walk ahead, and made a dive for it. A little girl sat down abruptly and cried. A woman screamed, and a man into whom Warren crashed, said peevishly: "What's the big idea of the heifer in town?"

It was too much. Warren hailed a passing taxi, and, with the help of the driver, pushed and prodded the reluctant dog into it. Lamb Pie was frightened then, and needed comforting. He climbed on Warren's lap to get it, and Warren, his once spotless clothes covered with muddy paw prints, suffered the ride to the office crushed and uncomplaining.

"If one of those fool stenographers makes a crack about him, I'll fire her," he thought.

Not one, but all did. No sooner had the door opened than Warren heard a chorus of female voices.

"Oh! Isn't he a darling?"

"Mr. Ware, where did you get him?"

"Will he eat candy?"

"Precious thing!"

"I simply worship dogs. Isn't he just divine?"

"The fools thought I had brought him for their amusement, and didn't do a tap of work all day," Warren wound up his grief to Janet that evening, and that wise little lady gave him a good dinner indeed before she said:

"I'm only surprised that he hasn't followed you before, he's so fond of you, the old silly."

And Warren thereupon felt actually friendly toward Lamb Pie.

But while Lamb Pie liked Warren, and for the greater part obeyed him with affectionate willingness, it was to Janet that

he gave all his doggie heart. His Best Beloved could do no wrong, only to shut her slave out of her presence.

He followed her from one room to another, never annoying her after his days of clumsy puppyhood had passed. Her wish was law and her displeasure torture to the devoted dog. While she moved about the house at her duties, he watched her with eager eyes, behaving sedately and quietly. But when she invited him for a walk, then he became delirious with joy.

Those long walks in the country were a source of never ending delight. His Best Beloved understood so perfectly all the wonderful things that happened.

She knew how exciting the faintest scent of a rabbit might prove, and sent him flying after a possible bunny with inspiring encouragement. Once he almost caught one, but it dodged around a tree and was miraculously lost when Lamb Pie floundered after. Best Beloved understood that too, and when Lamb Pie raised a protesting nose to howl out his woe, she laughed and pulled his ears and sympathized delightfully with him.

She knew how to take stinging burrs from paws, and where to find a cool stream when the chase left him hot and panting. She never scolded if he raced away and was gone over the hills a little too long, but after one adventure Lamb Pie was never from Best Beloved's side for many minutes.

It was late one afternoon when they had walked farther than usual. The lowering sun twinkling through budding trees, the song of birds newly arrived from the south, and the fragrance of fresh earth and young green things, were all conspirators to weave a spell about Janet and keep her out too long. Lamb Pie raced far ahead, and did not hear the whistle calling him to turn home.

As Janet strolled slowly back through the woods she saw a man coming toward her. A sudden and inexplicable sense of fright brought her to a brief stop, and then, with a contempt for her own alarm, she walked forward.

As she approached the man she was still more troubled to have him walk directly in her path. She turned aside, and was distressed to have him do the same.

He stood before her, barring her way. "Out for a walk?" he said.

"Yes," Janet answered pleasantly, and made a move as if to pass him.

But again he barred her way. "Want a side kick?" he asked with an unpleasant effort at a smile.

Janet answered in a low voice. "I do not know what you mean, but please let me pass."

"An escort, a little boy to trot at your side. Get the idea now?"

Janet said contemptuously: "You are annoying me. I wish to pass."

The man wasted no more words. "Hand over what you have and talk about the other."

"I have no money with me," Janet told him. "I do not carry a purse when I am out for a walk."

"That's a fair sized stone on your finger. Hand that over," the man replied. He caught her hand and twisted the ring on her finger. It was tight, and cut into her skin as the man wrenched. Janet screamed then, and the man struck her an ugly blow on the mouth.

VII

At the top of a hill stood Lamb Pie. He heard the scream, and did not need the second one to tell him that Best Beloved was in trouble. He raised his massive head, caught the direction of the sound, and catapulted himself down the slope. At the foot of the hill he gathered himself together and, like a huge and perfected machine, launched himself into his terrific stride.

As he ran, the screams of Best Beloved came to his ears, and the smell of a human beast to his nostrils. Lamb Pie didn't like that smell. The hair on his back would have raised if he had merely passed the man on the street, but to have this offensive human lay hands on Best Beloved was a spur to his rage and speed.

He tore around the bend in the road, and saw Janet struggling in the man's grasp. Lamb Pie's heart was filled with hatred, and a terrific roar spilled out of his throat as he launched himself at the tramp. There was a scream as the man went over backward, which ended in a gurgle of terror as Lamb Pie seized him firmly by the shoulder.

Janet spoke then. "Hold him, Lamb Pie. That's a good dog. Don't let him go. Understand?"

From his position on the man's chest, Lamb Pie raised understanding eyes, and from his mouth, fairly filled with tramp, came a low growl.

"Hold him until I come back," Janet ordered again, and raced to the nearest farmhouse to telephone to the police.

That night Warren's own eyes filled as he took Lamb Pie's head in his hands and looked into the steady, loyal eyes.

"God bless you, old dog. You're one of the family now," he whispered.

It was later in the spring that Warren Ware began to grow silent and wear a troubled look. Janet noticed it at once.

"Is there anything wrong with your business?" she asked.

"Nothing wrong, exactly, but something could be awfully right. You see, my partners want to sell out. They've both got the real estate bee and want to go South, and they'll sell out cheap."

"How much do they want?"

"Five thousand—and, Janet, it is worth fifteen thousand to me to have control of this business. It is going to be a world beater some day, and if I could swing this buy now we'd be sitting pretty in another year."

"Perhaps my father would lend you the money."

"I wouldn't ask him," Warren said promptly. "No, I'll try to get it somehow." But he couldn't raise more than two thousand dollars, and as the days passed he grew more unhappy over his inability to get the remaining amount.

"Of course, I understand that money is tight just now," he admitted to Janet, "but it does make me sick. If I was worth such a little bit more, I'd be worth so much more."

"I know," sympathized Janet, "business seems to be that way."

But she forgot Warren's troubles shortly after that when he brought her the news of a bench show to be held the following month in the city. It was to be in the hands of the Junior League, and, while A. K. C. standards were to hold, any dog would be admitted.

"I thought you might like to dress Lamb Pie up and show him off," Warren said. "He's grown into a pretty good-looking egg."

Janet's eyes shone. "Warren," she confided, "you don't know how good he really is. I got a book on Great Danes the other day, and as far as I can make out, he is one hundred per cent. His coloring is perfect, not a flaw in that beautiful fawn from his ears to his tail. I measured him yesterday,

and he is absolutely according to requirements. His shoulders are perfect according to his hips, and he has the best looking chest I've ever seen on a Great Dane. And no one else could equal the care I have given him. Come here, Lamb Pie, and strut your stuff."

Warren had to admit that there was no fault to find with the animal. The bright eyes, white teeth, firm hard paws, ironlike muscles, and satin coat pointed to excellent care.

"He can pose, too," Janet said. "I thought there might be a dog show some time, and I've been training him." She snapped her fingers. "Stand!" she commanded confidently.

Lamb Pie became a statue. His great shoulders were lifted a bit as he leaned forward on his strong legs. His head was held high, with the tip of his muzzle a little higher, and his pointed ears were erect and motionless.

Warren gasped at the superb beauty of the dog. "He is a stunner," he admitted. "Shouldn't wonder if you would get something with him."

From then on Janet brushed Lamb Pie daily and exercised him regularly, and when the bench show opened he took his place among recognized aristocrats.

VIII

IN the show ring Lamb Pie was the world's eighth wonder. Janet showed him herself, not caring to trust him to a hired trainer, and to the admiration of on-lookers, did not resort to tail-pulling, paw-placing, mouth-fixing, and surreptitious slaps to get results. She simply walked into the ring, with Lamb Pie marching sedately at her side, and placed him on the show platform. "Stand," she told him, and he did the rest.

Knowing the understanding in his great head, and the love in his equally great heart, she calmly turned her back on him, safe in the assurance that he would not break his pose. And Lamb Pie did not, beyond a gently wagging tail whenever Best Beloved looked his way.

Eight other dogs took their places beside him in the puppy class. There were puppies that wriggled in the hands of their trainers and owners, and yipped excitedly at one another and everything around them.

But Lamb Pie stood indifferent to the

racket, with his eyes glued on Janet. Even when a nervous Harlequin at his side nipped him crossly in the shoulder, he did not return the attention or even growl.

The judge gave him one glance. "Take him away," he said to Janet, and, when the other dogs were looked over, gave her a blue ribbon.

The novice class was as easy. Lamb Pie, grown more accustomed to the excitement of the show ring, behaved himself with splendid dignity and assurance. Janet was so proud after winning that blue ribbon that she told Lamb Pie all about it in secret, and Warren whispered to him that he was great stuff.

Lamb Pie wasn't sure why he was great stuff, but was content to be praised for any reason. "I'll use some of your money to buy you a great big ham bone," Janet told him, and while money meant nothing to Lamb Pie, the word bone had a familiar and delightful sound.

Two days after the winning of his first blue ribbons, Lamb Pie was taken before the judges to compete in the keen contest for the finest Great Dane.

"You haven't much to worry about," Warren told Janet the evening before.

But she answered: "I'm not so sure. Those Covington dogs are beauties. They should be, too; he has thousands to spend on his kennels, and the best dog men in the country are working for him. But," she added, "not one of his entries has had better care than Lamb Pie."

"Or half as good," Warren agreed.

It was a whirlwind showing that went before the judges for the best Great Dane. No less than fifteen of the finest canine aristocrats in the country were placed on the show platform; magnificent animals, all of them, representing the best in their various kennels. The judging was long and wearisome.

Lamb Pie stood through it all. His muscles ached a little from the strain, but he didn't mind that, for Best Beloved stood by him and told him in a low voice what a good dog he was.

What were all these men doing, anyhow? They held little measures to him, and opened his mouth. They pulled his paws and tail, too, and rubbed their hand down his back and legs. Lamb Pie wanted to play, then, but Best Beloved told him not to, so he suffered the familiarities in silence, and was glad when they were over.

One by one the dogs were led away, until finally only Lamb Pie and Alfred the Great stood side by side.

Janet leaned over him then. "Do your best, old doggums," she whispered, "and stand!" Lamb Pie gave her a worshipful look.

His head raised a bit, he looked straight before him, and his muscles became taut. A little flutter of admiration ran through the crowd about the platform.

The judge turned from Alfred the Great and walked to Lamb Pie. "You win," he said, and handed the ribbon to Janet.

Then he turned to W. R. Covington, who stood by his Alfred the Great. "I'm sorry not to have two blue ribbons," the official said. "That dog of yours is a very fine animal."

"It was a fair decision," replied the sportsman.

But when the dogs had been returned to their benches, Mr. Covington approached Janet with the usual brusque manner of the capitalist going after what he wants.

"Is that dog of yours for sale?"

"No," Janet answered promptly.

"I want him," Mr. Covington announced without ceremony, "and I usually get what I want. My hobby happens to be the Great Dane. I thought I had the finest specimens in the country until I saw that dog of yours."

Janet turned to Lamb Pie, with his background of blue ribbons. "I think you would have trouble beating him," she agreed.

"I can't beat him, and that is why I want him. Everything has its price. Will you take a thousand dollars for him?"

"No," Janet declared quietly.

"Will you take two thousand for him?" Mr. Covington said irritably. Warren's heart missed a beat or two. Lamb Pie was Lamb Pie, but only a dog after all. And two thousand dollars—Surely Janet wouldn't be so mad as to refuse that.

Janet shook her head. "I couldn't consider two thousand."

"It is an absurd price to ask for a dog," said the connoisseur of Great Danes.

"But I didn't ask it," Janet reminded him.

Mr. Covington made one last forceful offer. "I will give you three thousand for him."

"He is yours," Janet said.

She took the check with trembling fin-

gers, her lips quivered, and her eyes were misty as she turned from the bench. "You may have the ribbons," she added to Mr. Covington, and, without a word to Lamb Pie, walked away.

Warren followed, stunned. He tried to speak, but his voice choked him. He knew what Janet's love for the dog had been, and he knew, too, why she had made the sacrifice. On the street she handed him the check. "It will buy the business," was all she said.

"But, Janet, our darling old Lamb Pie."

"I was tired of a big dog around the house," she lied bravely.

IX

WARREN, deep in his successful business, did not notice that Janet's cheeks paled as the weeks went on, and that her manner grew listless and apathetic. It wasn't until one Sunday afternoon that he suggested a walk that her tired voice smote on his guilty ears.

"Janet," he said, in a troubled voice, "aren't you well?"

"Yes, quite well."

"You sound tired, and you look tired, too."

"I'm all right," she assured him wearily.

But Warren was not convinced, and the next day he stopped at their doctor's office to ask him to call around. The report was not reassuring.

"She is suffering from anæmia and general exhaustion. She needs something to take her interest, to get her out into the open air. I suggest golf," the medical man told Warren.

But Janet didn't care for golf. No, she didn't feel like walking. Yes, she had enjoyed her strolls with Lamb Pie along, but since the episode of the tramp she wasn't comfortable alone.

Warren, feeling guilty and miserable, bought a jolly little Peke and carried it out the next day. Janet was amused and played with it awhile, but after two days, said: "I gave Snookey away. That little sick girl down the street wanted him, and I couldn't refuse."

The following week Warren took home a lively little fox terrier, but Janet gave it to a lame boy. "Don't bring me any more dogs," she said. "I don't seem to care for them any more."

She grew daily more listless and tired. Warren suggested a trip or a visit to her

home, but she shook her head silently, and he did not press her.

After another two weeks he simply could not stand it. The sight of Janet's beautiful face grown so pale and thin was a constant reminder of his selfishness.

True, he told himself, he had not asked her to sell Lamb Pie, and the success of his business meant as much to her as it did to him, but—darn it all!—he couldn't see his Janet wasting away like this. Why had he permitted her to sell the dog, anyhow?

And then came the thought that perhaps she really wasn't missing Lamb Pie after all. But that went into the discard, for down in his heart Warren knew that Janet did miss her big devoted slave, and what was more, he admitted to himself that he missed the foolish pup, too.

He could stand the situation no longer, and made an important decision. That evening, when he went home, he carried a letter in his pocket. It was addressed to W. R. Covington, and read as follows:

MY DEAR MR. COVINGTON:

Mrs. Ware has been far from well these last few weeks, and the doctor tells me that she must be outdoors and have exercise. I cannot persuade her to take the long walks she used to enjoy, and I am sure the only way to get her out in the open again is to have Lamb Pie here to accompany her.

I realize that you paid a big price for the dog and consequently must want him. But I am asking you, as a very great favor, and because I am truly worried over Mrs. Ware's ill health, if you will sell the dog back to me. I am prepared to pay you the three thousand that you paid us, and more if you ask it, but I beg that you will not refuse to let me have the dog, as so much hinges on his return.

I am sure you will understand and sympathize with me in my anxiety over Mrs. Ware, and, if possible, allow me to have the dog back.

Very sincerely yours,

WARREN WARE.

As he stepped into the hall of his home, Janet met him. Her face was bright, and her eyes sparkled.

"Warren!" she cried breathlessly. "The most wonderful thing has happened."

"What?" he asked, delighted over the animated expression that had so long been gone from her pretty face.

"It's a big surprise, and I'll tell you after dinner, for you wouldn't eat a mouthful if you were to hear it now."

X

WARREN slipped into the dining room and put the letter addressed to Mr. Cov-

ington under her napkin. He was behind her chair as she came in. She held a letter in her hand.

"I can't keep it from you another second," she said, excitedly. "Read this. Isn't it wonderful?"

Warren opened the letter, and his face wore an amazed expression as he read:

MY DEAR MRS. WARE:

The dog I bought from you several months ago is sick. He has no appetite or interest and will not exercise even when coaxed out with the other dogs. My kennel man, Willie MacGregor, tells me that the dog is dying from a broken heart.

While I do not hold with such nonsense, I must admit that MacGregor is a wise old head, and I have found in the ten years that he has been in charge of my kennels that his diagnosis of dog character and ailments is just about infallible.

He tells me that Lamb Pie will never get back to form if kept in the kennels and away from you, and I am writing to ask you if you will take the dog back and keep him for us. When we want him we will send for him, and at other times trust him in your good hands.

I hope this is not an imposition on you and that you have not already bought another dog to take his place, and on the strength of MacGregor's assurance that "no other dog could hae a corner o' your hairt," I am sending Lamb Pie back to you with the man who carries this letter.

My thanks go with it, and the hope that you will be as glad to see the dog as he will be to see you.

Sincerely yours,

W. R. COVINGTON.

The lines of the letter danced and blurred before Warren's eyes. He looked up at last to the radiant girl before him.

"Is he here?" he asked in a voice that shook a little.

Janet stepped to the door. "Come on in, Lamb Pie," she called. "You can see him now."

And, as once, long months before, a huge, yellowish creature sailed through the air and hit Warren in the chest. Now, as then, Warren sat down suddenly. His arms went around the great neck, and he pressed his face down on the massive head.

"Oh, boy! Oh, boy! I'm glad you're home," he cried.

They sat down at the table, with Lamb Pie galloping in excited circles about them. Janet lifted her napkin and looked at the letter.

"Why, what's this?" she asked.

"Oh, that? That's just another of the unnecessary things I do in the office!" Warren laughed.

MARIGOLDS

So white the tender throat of her,
As cool as newly fallen snow!
If I might lay my lips thereon,
Their fever would be soothed, I know.
Yet dawn no other whiteness shows
Than pale alyssum's ghostly rows
Where sharp across its sweetness blows
The bitterness of marigolds.

So blue the quiet eyes of her,
Serene as deep, twilighted seas!
If I might look in them again,
It would assuage these memories.
But all the azure that I meet
Is larkspur fading in the heat
Where flaunt, as savage sunrays beat,
The brazen beds of marigolds.

So feather soft the touch of her—
Like eider breast or thistledown—
I thought it strange her chosen flower
Should wear this hardy gold and brown.
But, now the fragile rose is gone
With her whose love I leaned upon,
I, too, turn where her sweet soul won
The bitter strength of marigolds.

Nelle Richmond Eberhart

Tame Tactics

AN EAGLE-MAN RETURNS TO HIS BELOVED ELEMENT, AND
FINDS THERE IS A LITTLE WINGED GOD WHO
CAN OUTFLY ANY AIRPLANE

By Richard Howells Watkins

"PARSONS, the worst has occurred," Tom Redruth said to me in a tired sort of way, one evening, after he had spent more than five minutes tinkering with his pipe.

"Why don't you buy another, then?" I asked without too much sympathy. A man who makes ten thousand a year shouldn't expect too much lamentation even from his best friend when a disreputable old brier pipe, which cost twenty-five cents, goes wrong.

"You have not plumbed the depths of my sorrow, Parsons?" he answered, rolling a puff of smoke around his tongue experimentally. "With my customary exactness I should say that the base ingratitude of this pipe after months of kindness is not contributing more than three and a half per centum to my discomfort."

It was right then that I anticipated trouble.

"Go on," I said.

"That is what I cannot do," he announced gloomily, and shot a glance of grim reproof at the pipe.

"You can't tell me?"

"Hell, yes, I can tell you," he replied testily. "I am telling you. I can't go on."

"You mean—" I gasped.

"Precisely," he said. "You have grasped every shade and inflection of my words. Randolph will perspire to-morrow; Johnson will weep and, unless I am very much mistaken, Pratt will swear. And the firm of Randolph, Johnson & Pratt will hang out mourning banners and—if they believe in advertising—will insert a thirty line, single column ad in the public prints requesting the services of a high-class copy-writer who has had experience in handling automobile copy."

"But— Good Lord, man, they offered to take you into the firm!" I remonstrated with him. I was thoroughly upset.

"Yes, they would bind me with silken cords, and lure me to life imprisonment with soft promises," he replied, and laid down his pipe resignedly. He folded his hands behind the back of his neck and put his feet on the table in a pensive sort of way.

"But why?" I demanded. "Why are you throwing away the chance of a lifetime—an opportunity for economic independence—a—"

Tom interrupted me with some asperity. "Parsons," he said, "if you can't quit talking like an old-time bucketshop market letter, I shall be annoyed."

"Give me a reason, then," I urged.

"I can give you two," he answered moodily. "One of them will be the true one—which, I can't say. The other is a contributing circumstance."

I waited, rather breathlessly. These must be big reasons, I felt, to leave a ten-thousand-dollar job, with a partnership in a firm like Randolph, Johnson & Pratt to be had for the accepting.

"First, I am bored; second, I am in love."

This from cynical Tom Redruth, who went about New York regarding our highest achievements of urban life with unhappy amusement or weary disdain; who alternated restless midnight wanderings with hours of unmoving meditation. Here was the man who had been said to write the country's cleverest advertising copy—in love!

It took me some time to get over it. In fact, Tom had to ask me to goggle at something else before I came out of my daze.

"Taking the reasons in order," he said, and I had an idea that he was analyzing his feelings aloud rather than telling them to me. "Number one: I am bored. The whole economic, social, industrial, gustatorial, moral, physical, governmental, ethical, and thirstorial situation is driving me into a state of profound slumber. I am beginning to regard with indifference such sterling truths as: honesty is the best policy, a stitch in time saves nine, thrift is common sense applied to spending. It is not that I doubt these things, it is simply that I don't care that they are so—or aren't."

That was certainly tremendous, and I was going to say something about it when he halted me by announcing: "Number two: I am in love. How it happened, I cannot say. The lady is a little blue-eyed, insignificant, red-headed, impertinent bit of a thing whom I have found diverting now and then for a Sunday ramble by the sea or an evening argument about whether Schopenhauer was right about women, or merely bilious. I do not know whether she is in love with me, but she is fairly intelligent, and therefore I may assume that she is likely to be."

He paused there, as if he felt sure I was going to speak, but I was too shocked at the manner in which he had described the lady to say anything, so he went on:

"You have now heard my complete set of reasons."

"If you're going to get married you'll need all the money you can get, and I don't see—"

He jumped to his feet and glared at me. "Who said I was going to get married?" he demanded.

"You did. If you're in love, and she—" I was really quite disturbed by his attitude, and faltered. But he wouldn't have let me go on, anyhow.

"I said I was in love, because I am accustomed to facing facts, no matter how terrible they are. But as for saying I was going to get married— Does a sensible man sit on a bonfire because he's been burned by a match?"

Frankly, I was bewildered. "What are you going to do, then?" I asked.

"I'm going to skip, of course. This love business is the final proof of something my growing boredom has suggested to me. I'm getting tame—civilized—as soft as a middle-aged tomato. First comes the lethargy

of boredom; then the pangs of matrimony, and finally sweet unending sleep in some suburban Nirvana. Not for me! There is still living within me some of that quality whose very mention once was vulgar, but which now is featured in the best advertising circles—to wit, 'pep.' I am fleeing to the primeval."

"The primeval!" I gasped. "You're going to leave the United States—bury yourself in some desert or jungle—"

"Don't be mid-Victorian," he growled at me. As a matter of fact, he was quite irritable to me all that evening, snapping me up on the slightest pretext. "You know, and I know, that if I tried to bury myself in some desert or jungle, I'd find it teeming with anthropologists, movie companies, realtors, and bill posters. No, I'm not leaving America."

He sat down again.

"You did give me a scare," I said, much relieved. "They say there are some regions of the Adirondacks where the silence of perfect peace reigns sup—"

"They say! I said," he corrected coldly. "It was in the 'Own Your Own Camp' campaign. No, I'm not going to join the crowd there. I'm going back to the only frontier there is left."

The words gave me a chill, and when he stretched out his hands, palms upward, I confess I moved uneasily. "See these hands, that recently have been penning tributes to the Murtroyd Motor? Well, once they handled the joystick of a roaring, rocketing plane that lived and moved in the only frontier left in the world—the air."

"The air!" I repeated, and stared at him.

"You look better with your mouth shut," he said sharply. "Am I so tame an animal in your sight that my mere mention of an airplane turns you stiff in the joints? Am I only fodder for a furniture store to batten on? Do I look like a good prospect for a suburban real estate agent? If I do, then it may be too late to save myself now."

He seemed so doubtful about it that I saw my chance to save him.

"Well, Tom, you don't look as if you belonged in an airplane," I assured him. "In fact, I've often thought at the office how absolutely at home—how perfectly natural—you looked behind a glass-topped desk with a pile of—"

The manner in which he sprang up this

time was so precipitate, and so full of positive menace, that I equaled his speed of movement myself, and backed into a corner. But all he did was to kick the waste basket violently across the room. When it struck a bridge lamp and toppled it over, he gave a grunt of satisfaction and dropped into another chair.

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend," he said. "But you certainly wield a mean tongue, Parsons. That settles it. If I look as if I belonged in a swivel chair, it's proof positive that I must go back to the air at once."

"Must it be the air, Tom?" I asked, shuddering a bit at the thought of any one leaving earth in a flimsy machine. "How about—"

"Yes, it must be the air," he broke in. "The one illusion I have left, Parsons, is that the air is a fine, clean place, where simple courage, straight, quick thinking, and a steady hand are the most necessary concomitants of life; and cowardice, laziness, and shifty evasion mean a quick funeral. Damn it; that isn't an illusion—it's truth—scientific truth!"

He glared at me as if he thought I would deny it. "I'm not taking to the tall timbers, as overcivilized men formerly did to escape; I'm taking to the tall altitudes, which are better yet. Are you coming along with me?"

I reflected, with beating heart. I would have to resign my position with Randolph, Johnson & Pratt, but was not the gamble worth it? For a little, long-cherished idea of my own recurred in my mind. I felt sure Redruth would not follow this whim far, and when he tired of it—well, Redruth & Parsons has a splendid sound, as I've always thought, although I never ventured to mention it to Tom. With my knowledge of detail and his genius one could not tell how far we would go in the advertising field.

If I opposed him now he would be irritated; if I let him go off alone, without being at his side to implant the germ of the idea at the moment when he was most receptive, he might land anywhere. Despite his occasional lack of appreciation of my merits, he was fond of me, I know, so my plan was not just a day dream.

"Come on, Parsons," he urged. "It'll put marrow in your bones, take the silk out of your mustache, and put your voice an octave lower down. And I'm going to peel

off my coat and make a success of the flying business."

I took a deep breath. "I'll go," I said, rather tremulously. "But I'm going to hold your coat, not to fly."

He laughed in his deep, hearty voice, and struck me a blow across the shoulders.

"Fine!" he roared. "That's all I need. To-morrow morning we flee from the tame and all that typifies it—Randolph, Johnson & Pratt, the mass mind, Murtroyd Motors, chain stores, and chain gangs, and particularly Miss Everley Wade—confound her blue eyes and consume her red hair! Get some sleep, Parsons; things are going to happen to us to-morrow!"

He pounded me upon the back again and again, until I broke into a rather undignified run toward the door of his apartment in order to escape from the fruits of his enthusiastic approbation.

And as I walked homeward, quite soberly reflecting on my rashness in leaving a good, if rather unremunerative, position, I treasured up the name he had let fall—Miss Everley Wade. I am good at detail, as I believe I said before, and there was no knowing when that detail might become useful.

II

I MUST confess that although I did not look forward to Mineola, and the flying fields thereabout, I was really glad to get there next day, for the manner in which Tom Redruth drove his car on the way down was disconcerting, to say the least. Have I said that it was not a Murtroyd? Once, indeed, he did slow down, but it was merely to look at me with a peculiar sort of smile, and say:

"How do I look behind a steering wheel, Parsons?"

Before I could place the allusion or formulate a reply, he had jammed his foot upon the gasoline throttle, and the car was bounding and lurching ahead at a speed which drove the query completely from my mind.

Our reception at Mineola was sensational. Redruth walked into the long, low shed, or hangar, as I believe it is called, owned by a small but well-known aeronautical firm, and announced that he wished to buy one of their "three seaters."

The man he addressed, a rather short, stocky young man in khaki shirt, corduroy knickers, and leather puttees, rubbed his

ears violently and with great ostentation. He then walked completely around Tom, staring at him from all angles.

"You'll have to say it again, friend," this strange young man said at last. "It still doesn't sound plausible, or even possible. You aren't intimating that you are thinking of buying an airplane, are you? It simply isn't done!"

Tom Redruth laughed uproariously, and, although he had only met the young man at that moment, he grabbed him by the shoulder.

"That's what I said, young fellow. For cash."

"Cash, brother!" exclaimed the aeronautical person, and fell forward on Tom's chest in a poorly simulated swoon. Then he turned his head toward a companion. "Jim, shoot this man if he tries to escape," he ordered. I realized then that it was all horseplay.

"Calm yourself, friend, calm yourself," Tom said with a grin. "And remember, shooting will undoubtedly ensue if you try to pass me a left-handed ship or a relic that ought to be in the Smithsonian. Come through with a good bus. I'm going to start an air line to Boston, and I may need some more."

It was surprising how rapidly we were sold an airplane, and how speedily Tom rented a hangar and acquired the right to use the field. The facetious young man, whose name was Reagan, introduced himself as chief test pilot of the company, and explained that he also acted as general sales manager, the previous incumbent having, so he averred, died of starvation. He volunteered to go aloft with Tom Redruth until he had acquired once more something he described as "the feel of the air."

"Come on up with us, Parsons," Tom urged. "There's luck in odd numbers, you know."

"One is an odd number, too," I retorted, rather wittily, as I thought. "I feel sure that I will experience more good fortune alone on the ground than I could possibly acquire with you two in the air."

It was indeed a vast relief when they left me and climbed into the new and incredibly shimmering plane that Tom had picked out. For one thing, I had no desire to risk my life high above the earth, and, for another, I wanted to think.

Tom had told Reagan that he intended to start an air line to Boston, a fact that

he had withheld from me, and I desired to plan some method of dissuading him from such an enterprise. It could hardly be anything but costly, and what money Tom had—a matter of thirty thousand dollars, I understood—I desired him to keep for our use in the new firm which I intended to propose to him when he tired of flying.

My salary had not been sufficient for me to save any money, so we needed all of his. Decidedly, the shorter this silly and dangerous fancy of his lasted, the better off we would be.

So engrossed was I in my thoughts that I did not realize that I had strolled out into the field, until a sudden violent thundering and whistling near by caused me to look up. There, coming directly toward me, with wires screeching, motor roaring, and the terrible propeller flickering a deadly threat in front, was the plane.

Instantly, seemingly without volition, I flung myself face forward on the ground. I heard the plane whir overhead, like the angel of death, and then I raised my head.

It had landed, turned about, and now was coming toward me. I jumped up with a cry, and ran frantically toward the nearest shelter, the hangar. To my horror the airplane, like a tremendous mowing machine, pursued me along the ground. I was well within the shed, and crouching in a corner, when the machine halted outside, the motor stopped, and I breathed again.

"What in the name of the seven traffic cops of Columbus Circle do you mean by wandering out onto a flying field, when we were trying to land, and then popping up and keeping right in front of us all the way in to the hangar?" Tom Redruth demanded, in his less genial manner, as I emerged from the shed.

I hastened to disclaim any destructive tactics. It was then and there that I resolved that this flying frenzy of his should be a short one. My nerves would never stand much of this. I must take positive action at once.

His ill humor did not last long. He was pleased that not only had he flown the plane, but also he had discovered that he was not half as rusty as he had thought he would be.

"A few more rides with Reagan and I'll be as good as I ever was, which is saying a lot," he informed me most confidently. I restrained without difficulty my impulse to cheer.

That was a dreary day. For several hours I stood about the field, wrestling with my problem, while Tom conferred with his new friend, the test pilot, and inspected other planes in process of construction. Then I dragged myself wearily along with him while he zestfully made arrangements for oil and gas, purchased various tools and appurtenances, rented two rooms in a cottage near the field, and in general made ready for a long stay.

He even bought an alarm clock, and informed me we would roll out at six the following morning. He said this as if he enjoyed the idea, although, in defiance of rules, he was accustomed to arrive at his desk about ten o'clock.

By the time he was ready to light his pipe and indulge in an evening of rest and reflection, I was totally exhausted and frightfully depressed. It is difficult, indeed, to control the crude energies of a man like Tom Redruth, and I confess that I yielded somewhat to doubt as to my ability to turn him back to New York and the great opportunities for acquiring money for us both which he had so carelessly tossed away.

But light was to come to me in my hour of darkness. He was silent for quite a time that night as we sat on the porch of the cottage and watched the lights twinkling in the houses across the plain and an occasional flare of brilliance from the headlights of a passing car.

"Here I am—free at last," he said finally. I have learned that if I do not speak, Tom Redruth will inevitably break the silence, for he is a sociable, even a talkative, man when he is not in the lower depths of thought.

"I hope you are happy," I answered, and I doubt if I was able quite to keep a tinge of viciousness out of my voice. It was all very annoying.

"I am!" he asserted emphatically, even violently. "I'm damned happy. That girl doesn't know where I am, and she won't find out. I'm safe—she cannot draw me back to that soft, luxurious, rotten city existence where there is no danger to give zest to life, no fierce wind battering you in the face, no circle of dim, misty far-away countryside to look down on, no motor roaring your head off, no stick gripped in your fingers—"

He may have said more about the joys of the primeval, but I declined to listen.

It sounded much too uncomfortable and hazardous. But finally he left the topic and took up another.

"Yes, Parsons, I'm much luckier than I deserve," he announced in his most positive manner. "I don't mind admitting that I was getting mighty fond of that girl. She had the most mobile sort of countenance I ever saw—pensive, jolly, sympathetic, demure, surprised, calm, sorrowful, discerning, and—soothing. You could see one expression chase another right across her face. And her mind matched it. You couldn't keep track of her moods with a corps of psychologists armed with adding machines and questionnaires, but somehow that never bothered me."

He paused and sighed. "Yes, Parsons, I'm much luckier than I deserve," he repeated firmly. "That girl was easily the fairest, most lovely, of all the man-traps that nature has spread over the world to lure a youth into the prison of citified family life—sleep eight hours, do futile things at a desk eight hours, and fritter away eight hours in a dozen tame and enervating ways. Ugh! But I escaped."

It was then that my inspiration came to me. The tone of his voice suggested it, for there was something unhappy, something yearning about these last three words. I realized suddenly, that he was much more in love with the girl—Everley Wade—than he knew himself. And therein lay my weapon against this foolish flying craze.

"If you intend to start an air line to Boston, hadn't you better let the newspapers know about it?" I asked suddenly.

He uttered an exclamation, then chuckled. "I'd forgotten all about dear old advertising," he said. "You're quite right, Parsons."

"If you'll write a few ads and a few notices for the newspapers, I'll take them in for you to-morrow morning," I told him.

"Now's the time to turn 'em out," he said briskly, and got up. "I'm going to make this Boston air line a go if I have to diminish my bank account to the size of a gnat's egg and blow out a convulsion of my brain."

He disappeared within, leaving me a bit delighted at my own acumen.

III

I AM good at details, as I believe I remarked once before, so that the finding of Miss Everley Wade was not difficult. I

was prepared to jolly the telephone operator at our old office into revealing the number that Tom Redruth called most often; but that, fortunately, was not necessary. Seriously, I am not at my best in jollyng. I found that Miss Everley Wade was in the telephone book, on two successive lines—one her home, and the other her place of business.

Her occupation turned out to be interior decorating, conducted in the big front room of a brownstone apartment in the East Forties.

I had no difficulty in recognizing the girl from Tom's description. She was indeed blue-eyed, and of a remarkably soft and pinkish complexion, but her hair was auburn rather than red. She was an exceedingly well built young woman, and her grace of movement somehow suggested that she was an outdoor type of girl. Her gaze was direct and quite unembarrassed. I was not entirely comfortable as I felt it upon me, although I had carefully worked out what I was to say.

"Miss Wade," I began, "I am a friend of Tom Redruth, and I understand you are, too."

She nodded, but did not speak. I am not sure, but I thought I saw a flicker of quick interest in her face.

"I'm worried about Tom," I went on, watching her keenly, but, unfortunately, being unable to draw any conclusions from her mien. "He isn't happy. On a rash impulse he left Randolph, Johnson & Pratt to take up flying as a profession, and now, although he has merely begun the work, he is not happy."

I gave vent to a sigh and shook my head most sorrowfully, but the girl continued to gaze at me steadily without saying a word. I saw nothing of the varying expressions Tom had described as flitting across her face.

"He is not happy," I repeated hopefully, and waited.

"He is not happy," she murmured at last, and raised her rather disconcerting eyes to me. It is hard sometimes to refrain from twiddling one's hat. However, there was nothing to do then but go on:

"No, he is—that is, this foolish impulse may wreck his whole life—his whole brilliant future. I may say—in confidence"—she nodded brightly—"that I had planned something good for Tom. I intended to form an advertising firm with him, in which

he would receive full financial reward for his undoubted talent, and in which I would be the—the steady element."

I said this in order that she might realize the type of man with whom she was dealing—a man of affairs, although, due to various circumstances into which I cannot go at the moment, the affairs had so far been somewhat circumscribed.

"Do go on, Mr. Parsons," she begged very prettily.

"Miss Wade, I am deep in the confidence of Tom Redruth," I said in a burst of frankness which I thought was rather well done. "He had—indeed, still has—some foolish ideas about freedom, and love of flying, and hate of the city and its ways—but—I know that you will permit me to say this—he is deeply in love with you."

The girl's cheeks suddenly flushed scarlet, and her eyes, although still fixed on me, appeared to steady only by a great effort.

"It is indeed complimentary to me that Mr. Redruth makes no secret of his feeling toward me," she said quietly.

"We are old friends," I replied. "Nothing is hidden from me by him. He couldn't if he tried. Yes, I know, Miss Wade. He has confided in me, and I have read his heart. How deep in love he is he does not realize, but I do."

"It is kind of you to tell me all this," she breathed.

I paused to mop my forehead. The worst was out. Now that I had her talking, I felt safer. Perhaps we might even become chummy before the conversation was over. Although I am far from susceptible, I must confess her beauty touched me, and I felt a warm glow in my heart at the thought of my disinterested kindness in bringing these two lovers together.

It was remarkable, however, how that girl held her feelings in check. Not only, after that first blush, did she refrain from looking away from me, but her eyes, instead of softening, appeared to have even a frosty glitter, and their color somehow reminded me of the blue of a wintry sky.

"The reason he has abruptly left his position and you, without a word, is—forgive me—a fear that marriage would tie him down too closely to such things as advertising, dull home life, the city, and what he once called, in my hearing, the monotonous hell of routine. He fears, or thinks he fears, becoming tame."

"Tame?" she said, and her eyebrows

arched a bit. "Mr. Redruth has been seriously considering marrying me, and a feeling that it would be tame has dissuaded him?" she asked so quietly I could barely hear her. I remember wishing that she would not refer to Tom as Mr. Redruth, but I considered it due to her natural feminine modesty.

"He has—and only this fancy of his for flying has interfered with his proposing to you, I feel sure," I informed her. "There is no doubt of it," I added.

"And—what have you come to suggest?" she inquired suddenly, and I began to wish that she would not look me in the eye so continuously. There was something unpleasing about that, to me. It didn't seem quite decent, somehow, although my conscience was clear. It was for Tom that I was working.

"We must be frank with each other," I said. "I have come to suggest that we co-operate in assisting Tom to rid himself of this silly fad of his. In advertising there is a great future for Tom, for he is master of the trenchant phrase. You can see, no doubt, how it would redound to the happiness and—ah—prosperity of all three of us if Tom were brought back to the life for which he is so eminently fitted."

"Yes, indeed," she said. "We'd make a very good thing of it, wouldn't we—you as his partner, and I as his wife?"

"Both of us, of course, are interested in Tom's welfare above everything else," I interjected hastily, for I dislike putting things in such a crude way as she had done. "But at the same time some benefit could not help accruing to us."

"Precisely," she agreed. "And how are we to bring him back?"

"I have considered the matter," I said eagerly. "I believe it needs only a meeting between you and him to restore him to his senses and cause him to abandon this craze of his. But it must seem accidental. Could you not come down to Mineola as a passenger in response to his advertisement concerning the Boston Air Line? He is keeping his own name out of the newspapers for—ah—"

"So that I will not see it and run him down?" she asked gently.

"Something of the sort," I admitted. "He has a deadly fear of—"

"The call of the tame," she suggested. "And he considers me the priestess of the soft and silly, and himself the rugged, ad-

venturous male. Well, I'll come down. When is the first trip to be made?"

"Friday at 9 A.M.," I answered quickly. Elated at the success of my venture, I left her.

My next step was a clever one, I will say at the risk of seeming conceited. Into the first rubbish receptacle I encountered I dropped the publicity articles he had written the night before, and marked the advertisements for insertion on the morning of the flight, instead of the day before, as Tom had intended.

This would effectually prevent any other possible passenger from arriving on time. The flight would never be made. I was prepared to endure Tom's recriminations when he discovered the change. I would suffer in the common cause.

Filled with satisfaction, I returned to Mineola at once.

But my efforts to replace my friend in his proper position in life were not yet ended. During the several days ensuing I was diligent in my study of the airplane Tom had purchased, and tireless in my questioning of both Tom and Reagan concerning its mechanism. Some of the answers they gave me were extraordinary—so extraordinary that I was compelled to consider them facetious, but at other times they spoke what I could discern instantly as the truth.

I learned what I had determined to learn, and that was a sure method of stopping the motor so that the plane could not proceed. In the event that Miss Wade failed to dissuade Tom from the flight to Boston, I intended to make quite sure that it would end in such an ignominious failure as would completely discourage him. Bear in mind that I did this, although knowing it would be a bitter blow, for his own welfare, and only incidentally for that of his faithful friend, myself, and for his devoted *fiancée*.

On Thursday morning Tom made a trial trip to Boston and back to Mineola, in order to inspect the field at the other end that had been recommended to him. He returned tired, but enthusiastic about the performance of the machine. He was fortunately so exhausted that he did not demand to see the morning newspapers, which, of course, did not carry in their columns the advertisement he had written.

He did, however, ask anxiously about the weather, and I had some small satisfaction

in telling him that a northeast gale was predicted to strike the New England States that very night. His face fell.

"I was afraid something was brewing," he murmured thoughtfully.

We retired early that night, and although the rising wind rattling the panes of that ill built cottage kept me awake, I did not indulge in uncouth invectives against it on this account. It seemed as if the elements had entered our benevolent little conspiracy against Tom.

At six o'clock that morning Tom banged on my door, and at his invitation I joined him in his room. Together, we stared through the streaming window pane across the field, watching the gusty wind scattering the rain and raising tiny cat's-paws on the pools that had been collected.

"Well, there's one comfort," Tom said at last. "Nobody will be crazy enough to come down from New York to fly to Boston on a day like this. We'll announce that the first flight has been postponed until Monday. I'm going back to bed for an hour."

I left him, and for the first time a little doubt entered my mind. Would Miss Wade venture from the city on a day like this? As it eventuated, I need not have worried about *that*.

IV

At half after eight we were standing together in the hangar, with the door open a foot or so, debating the matter of whether it would be better for me to go to New York, when we heard the sounds of a taxicab without. Suddenly Miss Wade appeared and slipped through the crack into the hangar.

"They told me this was the headquarters of the Boston Air Line—" she began, and then suddenly broke off. "Why, Tom! Are you going to Boston, too?"

"Everley!" he exclaimed. "What in the world are you doing down here?"

"I've come to go to Boston," she said. "I missed the train, and I must get in my bid on a big interior decorating job at Boston before one o'clock." She turned to me, and her face appeared eager, even anxious. It was amazing what control she had over it. "Are you the Air Line representative?" she inquired.

I indicated Tom. "This gentleman is chief pilot and general manager," I quickly explained.

"You are!" she cried, incredulously. "Really, Tom?" she asked. He nodded, apparently still to amazed to speak.

His eyes, as I had noted with satisfaction, had been fairly eating her up, and she did present a most charming appearance in her chic little blue raincoat, with a tiny hat drawn snugly down over her head, and a wisp or two of wet curling hair escaping from under it.

"Why, how ridiculous!" she exclaimed, and a little trill of laughter escaped her.

"Ridiculous?" he repeated, and his eyes ceased to regard her with such an expression of dazed delight. "What do you mean?"

"Why, that you — sober, conservative, *fat* old Tom Redruth should embark on such an adventurous career as running an air line."

"Fat!" He straightened up as if she had slapped him in the face. I started, too, for it did not seem to me that this was a very favorable method of exerting her power over him. Of course he is slightly heavier in build than he used to be, but he is certainly not fat. Her statement was unjust, as well as unwise.

"You are not a very good judge of men if you consider me sober, conservative—or—or—" Tom began uncertainly. "Circumstances—life in New York—may alter a man superficially, but it cannot destroy his underlying spirit."

She paid no attention to this. "I never really believed you when you told me you were a lieutenant in the air service in your younger days. I thought you were just entertaining me with a few yarns."

Tom's face reddened, and his voice was hoarse with his efforts to control it. "I am not accustomed to lying about my war service, Everley," he said stiffly.

"Come, now, don't be angry with me," she chided him gently. "You can't really blame me for thinking you were joking, can you? But you don't really try to fly *now*, do you?"

"I do," he snapped. By this time I was thoroughly alarmed, and doubts as to my wisdom in having the girl come down here entered my head. No better way to antagonize Tom could possibly have been devised. I reproved myself inwardly for not having instructed her just how to handle him.

But she disregarded entirely his obvious anger. A sudden expression of concern

crossed her face, and she pulled back the sleeve of the raincoat to peer at her tiny wrist watch.

"Well, I'm at your mercy, then," she remarked lightly. "If we leave at nine sharp, we're sure to get there by eleven thirty, aren't we?"

Tom had been staring at her steadily, as he had gone through emotions ranging from delight to anger, but now his gaze became intensified.

"You don't think we're going to fly on a day like this?" he demanded.

"What?" she asked, with a most ingenuous surprise on her face. "Why, it was in the paper this morning! Oh, I see!" She smiled, giggled a bit. "You're making fun of me. You're pretending you don't like to fly in the rain!"

"In the rain!" Tom exclaimed, and his voice was almost a roar of protest. He stretched his arm out toward the drenched, wind-swept field. "My dear Everley, there's forty or fifty miles of gusty wind out there, and sixty or seventy miles a few thousand feet up."

Her face grew serious. "You really mean you aren't going to fly because it's windy out?" she asked.

"Windy out!" he repeated. "Windy! This is a northeaster, Everley—a storm!"

"And airplanes can't fly except when there's a dead calm?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"They can, but they don't fool around in gales when they don't have to," Tom replied grimly.

"But I *do* have to get to Boston," she asserted emphatically. "Tom, you don't mean to say that after having advertised an airplane to fly to Boston to-day, and brought me all the way down here to go, you're afraid to do it?"

I didn't know that men as young and as athletic as Tom Redruth could get purple, but undoubtedly that was the hue that spread over his countenance.

"You've told me so much about truth in advertising, and I really believed you," she went on, pathetically. "But no!" she added, and her voice indicated that she thought she was being generous. "I won't say you've told an untruth in the newspapers and deceived people. You meant to fly, but—but—well, Tom, you're just a little too much of a civilized person—a bit too tame, to face the possible danger of flying. You didn't mean to lie."

Tom wanted to speak, but he simply couldn't. I am not familiar with medical terminology, but I should say he suffered from paralysis of the vocal cords due to an excess of emotion.

"As an old friend, Tom," she continued, lowering her voice in an ostensible effort to prevent me or the grinning mechanics from hearing, "you mustn't object to my being frank. I do think you should go back to advertising, or something like that, which doesn't require any physical exertion or— or too much cour—hardihood. Most of us are good at something, but we can't all be daring aviators." She stopped abruptly and looked at me.

"What is that funny little man making faces at me for?" she asked Tom.

She referred to me! There was no doubt of it!

During the advice the girl had showered upon Redruth he had turned from her, and was making violent gestures to the mechanics. I had taken advantage of this to convey to the girl, as well as I could, that she was on the wrong track; that she was not to infuriate him, but to fascinate him. And she had called me a funny little man!

Tom whirled on me like a wounded lion, and his voice came back to him.

"You keep out of this altogether, Parsons," he growled, and I was only too eager to back away from him and that ungrateful girl. At this moment I gave up. I realized that either through treachery or stupidity the girl had ruined our strategy. Now she stepped forward and laid a hand on Tom's arm.

"Before I go, Tom, do give me the name of some good pilot who has a machine near here," she said. "I forgive you—I don't blame you a bit—but I must get to Bos—"

Tom jerked away from her and rushed furiously at the two mechanics.

"Open that door, you loafing nitwits!" he thundered.

They jumped forward as if he had begun shooting at them.

"Get that machine out damnation quick, and warm her up in a hurry. Move!"

For a moment he glared at the fast working mechanics; then he turned back to the girl.

"You sit down somewhere," he rumbled, and he glowered at her as he had glared at the mechanics. "I'll take you to Boston, but if both the wings blow off her don't blame me."

"I won't, Tom," she promised, smiling delightedly. "Only do calm down! Don't be nervous; I'm sure you'll get along quite nicely." I cannot describe his reaction to this speech; it really is beyond me.

In the partial shelter of the hangar the mechanics succeeded in starting the motor, but I saw with apprehension that the wings swayed and lifted in the gusts that occasionally swirled about the shed. What it would be out on the field I could not imagine. Even in the hangar it was so drafty that I feared I would catch cold before they started.

It was while I was waiting, and while Tom was pacing up and down and talking to himself, that I bethought myself of the method of stopping the motor that I had learned. It would not do, I considered, to let these two fight that storm at imminent risk all the way to Boston. Better, by far, that the plane should stop and descend almost at once.

Besides, since Tom was thoroughly disgusted with the girl, my only chance to win him to the idea of Redruth & Parsons, Advertising, was to make the thought of aviation revolting. And the way to bring that about was, of course, to cause this flight to fail.

"I'll see that the front cockpit is comfortable for the lady," I told Tom, but he hardly heard me. Rather courageously I climbed into the machine, though it was lifting and straining under me. One of the mechanics was in the rear cockpit, operating the throttle to warm the motor, but he could not see what I was doing within the forward compartment.

While I pretended to be adjusting a cushion, I swiftly did my work. There was a small gasoline tank which formed part of the upper wing. This tank was fed by fuel pumped from a larger tank in the framework of the machine, and from the upper tank the fuel flowed down into the motor. All this I had learned that week.

With a pair of pliers I had secreted on my person I pinched the copper tube running from the storage tank through the cockpit and up beside a support to the tank above. Thus I insured that when the smaller tank was empty the motor would cease to operate from lack of fuel.

I had finished this, and in the shelter of the cockpit was again slipping my pliers in my inside pocket, when Tom's voice came roaring up. Startled, I dropped the pliers.

"All right! She's warm enough. Come down!" he shouted to the mechanic, and the man scrambled down. I picked up the pliers, put them in my pocket, and was about to scramble to the ground when Tom halted me.

"Help the lady up!" he shouted to me. I extended a hand to Miss Wade. Instead of climbing into the forward cockpit, she slipped into the seat in the rear compartment, beside the pilot's place. Tom, with the swiftness endowed by a great anger, leaped up and wriggled into his seat.

"Stay where you are, Parsons," he thundered most unexpectedly at me. "I'm taking you along as chaperon."

The motor burst into a series of detonations, and the plane lunged forward at that moment. My cry of despair was utterly drowned out. Tom kept his eyes under their goggles fixed steadily ahead and paid no attention to me. He was virtually shanghaiing me on that most hazardous flight, and all my affection for him evaporated at that moment.

The machine bounced through puddles and over hummocks on the uneven field. Suddenly the tremendous clamor of the engine intensified. The jolting was replaced abruptly by a less severe but emphatically more disquieting movement.

I looked over the side. A stream of raindrops, hard as pellets of hail, pattered upon my face as it protruded beyond the windshield, and I withdrew it hastily. But I had seen enough to realize the worst. The machine was in the air. The safe, firm earth was dropping away beneath us.

We reeled and rocked in the fierce wind, but the terrific power of the motor forced us on. Momentarily I awaited the end, for I could sense the overwhelming, solid pressure of wind and rain against those long, flimsy, fabric-covered wings. At what instant would they crumple, leaving the storm to dash us to the ground?

Not a second passed but that during it my seat dropped under me in a sudden, wholly unanticipated movement that brought my heart to my mouth. Then, as I clutched madly at the cockpit's sides, it would return beneath me, and I would feel quick pressure as the machine and my own body were forced higher, farther from earth, by some vagrant blast of air. How long it was before I recovered sufficient command over myself to act, I do not know.

But I do know that, as soon as I could master my body, I turned and directed a suppliant gaze upon Tom Redruth; and raised my hands imploringly. Yes, I humbled myself before him in an effort to dissuade him from this madness.

But my effort went for naught. His gaze was straight ahead, and his mouth was a mere ruthless line across his face. That fixed, unchanging expression was in weird contrast with the unceasing movement of his shoulders as he sought to adjust the machine to the shifting forces that strove to crumple and toss it to earth.

The girl beside him had her face turned toward his, and was watching every movement of his straining body. Her countenance showed no fear—a fact I attributed to her ignorance or to some strange hysteria that held her, paralyzed, in its grip. Certainly it was, to any person of intelligence, like myself, a terrible time.

Unable to attract Tom Redruth's attention, I turned forward once more, and a fresh dismay assailed me as I perceived that the plane was crossing the coast line of the north shore of Long Island, and venturing out over the gray, wind-swept desolation of the Sound. True, as I instantly detected, the air was rioting less madly over the smoother surface of the water than it was over the rugged land, but this did not compensate for the added danger of the leaping white waves.

How long we continued to press our way along against the fury of the wind I do not know, but we were approaching the shore of the mainland when suddenly the motor sputtered and stopped. And as if in malicious response to the cessation of that great roar, the wind whistled louder through the wires, and set the plane to bouncing madly, as if not air, but raging water, held it in merciless grip.

V

ABRUPTLY the nose of the plane dropped downward. I remembered something that until that moment the peril of the flight had obscured—that the wing tank was empty and I had cut off the supply of gasoline. We must land now. A turn of my head killed my thrill of joy, for the grim, tense expression of Tom Redruth's face was more pronounced than before.

And from the increased pitching of the plane I realized why this was—that without the aid of the motor the storm seemed

certain to wreck the machine. I had not considered this possibility in my plan to sicken Tom of flying, and now my own life, as well as theirs, was in jeopardy. I had indeed erred most grievously in my strategy. But it was ignorance, not malice, I must insist.

With frantic fingers I pulled out the pliers I had used, and attempted to undo my work on the little copper tube that conveyed fuel to the tank above me in the wing. But my hands shook. I could not firmly grip the tool, nor had I the strength in my state of nervousness to straighten out the dent I had made.

I cast an agonized glance downward. The machine was diving sharply toward the edge of a bluff, beyond which was a green field whose farther edge was fringed with trees. It seemed to me that the airplane must surely strike the cliff and fall in fragments into the water.

I turned in terror-stricken appeal to Tom, but he, face still emotionless, save for deepened lines of determination about the mouth, was leaning over the edge of the cockpit, staring downward. The girl still watched him unmovingly. I felt that all hope was gone.

How we did it I do not understand, but the nose of the machine suddenly lifted, and we shot in over the field. For an instant the plane wavered above the grass, then the nose dipped again, and I felt the grateful bounce caused by solid earth beneath the wheels. We were safe.

But Tom Redruth gave me no opportunity to be thankful. Without a word he flung himself forward and gripped my right hand, which still clutched the pliers.

"What were you doing with that little plaything, Parsons?" he inquired, and his quick eyes searched the cockpit while I stammered an answer. His swiftness completely surprised me, and I am not at my best when surprised. "Yes, I saw you. Did you fool with my gas line? Is that why the motor quit? Ah!"

He had seen it—the pinch I had given the tubing. Without another word he applied the pincers to the pipe. When he had fixed it he dragged me from the cockpit to the ground.

"Now, what's the game?" he demanded.

"Don't blame me, Tom," I besought him, for his expression was alarming in the extreme. "I—in fact, we both—were trying to save you from yourself. We wanted

to win you away from this flying folly—to direct your talents to the work you are fitted for. I—I wanted you to form an advertising firm with me—Redruth & Parsons, Tom—”

But he would not let me finish. “Trying to get me back to the city, eh? Want to tie me on the treadmill to grind out more money! Is that it? Who do you mean by ‘we,’ you—you, my friend? Speak up!”

His face was terrible. I could only indicate Miss Wac^{OC} with a hand that was shaking.

“What!” he burst out, whirling to confront the girl. “You’re in this, too? Your trip to Boston was not a coincidence? You are plotting to get me back to New York, too?”

The girl’s face flamed, and as he saw it his hand fell quite away from my collar. I edged farther from him. He jerked off his helmet and stared at her intently.

Suddenly he laughed. It was a most unpleasant sound; a most disquieting situation, there on that windy field. He bowed to her mockingly.

“Really, I am complimented,” he said with icy politeness. “I’ve heard of ‘Diana the Huntress,’ but I didn’t know the sex was quite so open in hunting—men.”

The scarlet in her face faded away so quickly that the pallor succeeding it was strange.

“The only compliment I know is a delicate little one you have paid yourself—as usual, Tom,” she said quite composedly. “You are quite as conceited on the ground as you are—apprehensive—in the air.”

“Conceited?” he inquired, and his face was saturnine. “Apprehensive? I admire your quick shift from the defensive to the offensive, but I’m afraid it won’t do, Everley. What is this compliment I have paid myself?”

“I will tell you,” the girl answered, and there was no longer anything unusual in either her tone or her color. “First, according to your friend, you boast that I love you, and you run away from the city because you fear me and my taming influence. Taming! Then you imagine I pursue you to capture, not to—punish you.”

“Punish?” he repeated, and the surprise in his voice was quite obvious.

“To punish and instruct,” she confirmed. “You see, I resent an imputation of tameness from so prosaic a source as yourself. And I also resent appearing as

the pursuing female in your little talks with your friends.”

“Go on; go on,” he muttered, slashing at his leg with his wet helmet. “I suppose I deserve a tongue lashing.”

“There is no need for me to go further,” she replied. “My mission is accomplished. I doubt that after shaming you into this flight you can ever call me soft and tame again, even to yourself. And I think, too, that you realize now that you are perfectly safe from my wiles. Didn’t I cure you at Mineola of any regard you may have had for me?”

He stared at her, positively aghast, for more than a minute, while the wind whistled and tugged at the wings of the plane, and I stood shivering in the wind, completely unnerved by all that had befallen me in the upper air.

But, with all my woes, it was a pleasure to me to see this friend of mine, who had almost wrung my neck, humbled by the girl who faced him with unwavering eyes. It was his gaze that fell first.

“I seem to have made a—fool of myself in a number of ways,” he blurted out, and his unhappiness was plain in his voice. “And yet I was only making a try at doing something I’ve always wanted to do—break away from the city and get back into the air. But this enterprising friend of mine, Parsons, is probably right. I belong hunched over a desk, whether I like it or hate it.”

He paused, and looked swiftly up from the ground into the girl’s face. “And—and I am quite safe from you, Everley. I—I see that now. I always was quite safe—wasn’t I?”

He gave vent to a dismal laugh. “I realize now what I’ve missed—what I never had a chance to get. You have a splendid way of making things clear, Everley. I apologize, of course.”

The girl said nothing. Redruth’s head had dropped down on his chest again, and he slashed aimlessly at his puttees with the dangling helmet.

“Yes, I thought I was a real man—fit to fly—too good for a tame city life—with cabarets for excitement and speeding taxicabs for danger—but you’ve showed me up, Everley. You never turned a hair, while I sweated with fear all the way from Mineola. Well, I’m going back to New York.”

He glanced sharply at the trees that rose

like tall palisades at the end of the field. Then he turned to the plane.

"But before I do that I'm going to finish this job—take this ship to Boston."

In an instant the calm she had maintained so long left her.

"Tom, you mustn't!" she exclaimed. "You mustn't go back to New York. You've broken away. Your heart's in flying; it is your life! It would be defeat—forever."

Now it was my turn to stare aghast at this woman who, I had thought, loved Tom Redruth. She was urging him on—up into the storm that swirled overhead. In a burst of words she went on:

"Oh, I was afraid in the plane, Tom.

Frightfully afraid for a moment; but you were there, calm and fighting, and I felt—knew—you were born to the air. Your quick arm was between us and death. You must go on!"

Redruth took a quick step toward her.

"I'm going on," he said. "Everley—Everley—will— Do you want to go to—to Boston, Everley?"

"I still do, Tom," she answered, and came toward him.

Without a word to me, standing there on the sodden field, he lifted her into the machine. A few moments later the lurching, tossing plane roared toward the trees, shot suddenly upward into the gale that lashed their tops, and disappeared from view.

BALLADE OF A LITTLE FUN

I ASK not wealth, I ask not fame,
With dusty toil I am content,
Day in, day out, the dreary same;
Over my task industrious bent,
I plead no favored temperament;
But, only when the day is done,
Beneath the starry firmament,
All that I ask—a little fun.

The week is long, am I to blame
If I, bored stiff, with humdrum spent,
Find life intolerably tame,
And ask in words irreverent:
Were human beings only meant
To grub beneath the laughing sun?
I really am not exigent:
All that I ask—a little fun.

O life's for some a merry game,
Gay sinners they, impenitent,
A thing of dance and sap and flame,
Gold, girls and kisses, song and scent:
To foot the bills, to pay the rent,
Such pleasures keep one on the run;
Will it be ever different?
All that I ask—a little fun.

ENVOI

Friend in the same predicament,
Must we go on as we begun?
Is life like ours worth a — cent?
All that I ask—a little fun!

Richard Le Gallienne

The Compromising Letter

A ROMANTIC AFTERMATH OF THE RARE OLD DAYS WHEN
CHARMING LADIES WIELDED A FACILE QUILL

By Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

MR. RONALD PHILLIPS was an authority upon Mme. Van Der Dokjen; indeed he was the greatest living authority.

He was also the sole authority. His fellow countrymen knew little about Mme. Van Der Dokjen, and seemed to care less. He was not sorry for this.

He had written a book called "Mme. Van Der Dokjen and Her Milieu," in which he gave as much information as he thought suitable for the public; but he had a large collection of her letters and so on. He was thankful that there were no other authorities to go snooping around and finding out the things he did not choose to publish.

Not that the lady had any guilty secrets in her life. She was perfection. Only, there were little things, what you might call trifling inconsistencies, things pardonable, even charming in themselves, but foreign to her austere and energetic character.

For instance, that letter written to her sister in 1777, in which she described, with such unexpected enthusiasm, a certain young captain in General Washington's army. Mme. Van Der Dokjen was at that time forty-three years of age. No doubt her interest in the young soldier was pure patriotism.

But Mr. Phillips preferred not to publish that letter; so squeamish was he, that he did not even make use of the recipe it contained for quince conserve, which illustrated her splendid housewifely talents.

Indeed, he grew nervous about Mme. Van Der Dokjen. He lived in dread lest some one should discover new documents concerning her. It was for this reason that he went to live in the historic cottage on the banks of the Hudson, in which she had ended her days. He thought that perhaps there were documents hidden in it.

It was as historic a cottage as one could wish to see. There were in it a spinet, a frame for making candles, a spinning-wheel, and other interesting objects. He set to work at once upon a new book to be called "When Home Was Home," which would depict Mme. Van Der Dokjen living in this cottage, making conserves and candles, playing upon the spinet, and entertaining the illustrious men of the age.

Mr. Van Der Dokjen was there, too, but Phillips did not care much for him. A dull dog, he must have been.

In this book, Phillips was going to kill two birds with a pretty heavy stone. He was going to give more highly valuable information about Mme. Van Der Dokjen, and he was also going to show how lamentably had the home declined since that day. Home life had degenerated, and home life was the very foundation of morality.

And the foundation of home life was—thrift. There was no virtue he admired more. There was a great deal about thrift in his book.

In the meantime, though, he had to eat to live. He could not himself make conserves and candles; there must be a womanly spirit to look after all this. So he invited his Cousin Winnie to become his housekeeper.

She said that life could hold no greater joy, but that she could not leave her only child. This was natural and admirable, and, as the child was a daughter of twenty, who would not be likely to scratch the furniture or steal the conserves, he said to bring her.

In that branch of the family, Ronald Phillips was supreme. Not only was he rich, but he was rich in the correct way—mysteriously. Everybody knew exactly how much he had inherited from his father,

but nobody knew how much he had now, or how much he spent—or how he intended to leave his fortune. Cousin Ronald's money was one of the best and brightest topics in the family.

Also he was literary. He was rich, he was literary, and he had great natural distinction. He disapproved of more things than any one else in the family. He was tall, and handsome, in a distinguished way; he had gray hair parted in the middle, a gray goatee, and a fine voice. Cousin Winnie admired him profoundly.

Her child, though, the young Lucy, belonged to a more critical generation. She saw certain flaws. But she said nothing. She came with her mother to the historic cottage, prepared to do her best.

She had studied domestic science; she was energetic and healthy, and she thought that she and her mother could make Cousin Ronald very comfortable. She wished to do so; that was her nature. She was a kind little thing.

She was a pretty little thing, too. Cousin Ronald admitted it. Not in the Mme. Van Der Dokjen style, but she was young yet. The years might bring her more of the dignity, the calm of that matchless woman.

And, as it was, she had her good points; she had clear, steady blue eyes, and very satisfactory light hair, and she had a pleasing sort of gayety about her. She sang while she was working. It was agreeable to hear her.

She had faults, undoubtedly, but they were, Cousin Ronald thought, more the faults of her deplorable generation than anything inherent. He thought they might be cured. He interpreted Mme. Van Der Dokjen to her, also the significance of home life.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, Cousin Ronald, I know it's lovely. But, you see, I don't have much time during the day, and in the evening I do like to read or write letters."

"Mme. Van Der Dokjen wrote letters," he pointed out. "An astounding quantity of letters, when one considers her unflagging devotion to her domestic duties, and her truly brilliant social life. There is no doubt but that many of these letters—models of the epistolary art—were written by the light of candles, Lucy."

"Yes, I know!" Lucy agreed. "But she was different."

"I concede the point," said Cousin Ronald, with a trace of severity. "Where, I

ask, in the modern world, can one find a woman who is not different—deplorably different? But I should like to point out to you, Lucy, that this habit of continually saying—'I know!'—gives a quite false impression of your character. I do not believe you to be one of these intolerable modern young women who fancy they 'know' everything."

"Yes, I know!" said Lucy. "I mean—I know that what you say is right, Cousin Ronald. Only, I thought that just one oil lamp—"

He told her that even one oil lamp would utterly destroy the "atmosphere" of the historic cottage.

"All right!" Lucy replied.

He remembered how Mme. Van Der Dokjen was wont to reply to the requests or commands of her elders. "You must be assured, Hon'd Sir, of my pleasure in conforming to y'r lightest wish." "All right!" That was the modern way. He sighed.

"And now your dinner's ready," Lucy announced. "Something awfully nice, too."

He sighed no more. These meals which Cousin Winnie and her child prepared for him were charming; he had never enjoyed anything more. They had the real old-fashioned homeliness; plain food, but beautifully cooked, and plenty of it. Cousin Ronald had spent his life in modest hotels; and this was his first experience, since childhood, of home life.

"You have been here one month to-day, Cousin Winnie," he remarked, as he finished his fried chicken. "I must thank you. It has been—for me, that is—a most delightful month."

"I'm sure, Cousin Ronald, it has been a pleasure," said Cousin Winnie. Tears came into her eyes. It was so touching to see Cousin Ronald grateful.

By common consent they omitted Lucy from the compliments. Like most persons of middle-age, they knew that it is not wise to praise the young; they remember what you say, and use it against you later on. Cousin Ronald knew this by instinct, but Cousin Winnie knew from experience.

She was a thin, worn little lady, with a gentle and pretty face. It was the general opinion in the family that she had been the helpless victim of a cruel fate, and certainly she had had many undeserved misfortunes. But she had survived them. She

had kept upon the surface of the stormy sea, like a cork. She could stand a good deal.

This was a good thing, for fresh trials were approaching.

II

It was a superb September morning, warm and still. The windows of the dining room were open as they sat at breakfast, and Cousin Winnie saw white butterflies out in the neat little garden. Most lovely perfumes drifted in, fresh-cut grass and pine needles, and the very last roses; and from the kitchen came another current, warmer, like a Gulf Stream, and less romantic, but beautiful, made of the aromas of pancakes, maple sirup, bacon, and coffee.

The sun shone in; everything was good, and right, and Cousin Winnie was happy. Her mail, too, was satisfactory. She had a letter from a jealous and spiteful cousin in California, who insinuated that Cousin Ronald was growing old, and falling prey to certain unscrupulous relatives.

The injustice of this really flattered Cousin Winnie. Nobody could have been less designing than she. The arrangement was entirely of Cousin Ronald's making; he had sought them out, in their cozy little flat in New York, where they had managed well enough with the aid of Lucy's salary as an assistant librarian.

They had been glad to come, but it was nothing like so dazzling a situation as the spiteful cousin in California imagined. The financial compensation was very modest. Very! Cousin Ronald was no spendthrift.

And there was a great deal of work to be done in this cottage which was so charmingly old fashioned. Still, Cousin Winnie was glad she had come, because, for all Cousin Ronald's distinction, his literary attainments, she thought he was *pathetic*. She glanced up from the spiteful cousin's letter, to enjoy the heart-warming spectacle of the poor man eating buckwheat cakes.

But he was not eating at all. He was staring before him with unseeing eyes.

"Is anything the matter, Cousin Ronald?" she asked, anxiously.

"Er—no, no," he answered. "That is—nothing wrong with this most excellent breakfast, my dear Winnie. But—er—but—er—"

"Did you say 'butter,' Ronald?"

"No, no, thank you. I have received a letter. I fear I must ask you to excuse me,

Winnie." He arose. "I—I am perturbed!" he added. "I must be alone for a time."

He gathered together his letters, most of which he had not yet opened, and went out of the dining room, into his study. He locked the door, and sat down before his desk.

"Merciful Powers!" he murmured.

The blow had fallen. Mme. Van Der Dokjen was most hideously threatened.

Again he read the fatal letter.

DEAR MR. PHILLIPS:

Having heard of your interest in Colonial history, and particularly in Mme. Van Der Dokjen, I feel sure you will be pleased to learn that I have discovered a letter written by her to an ancestor of mine—a certain Ephraim Ordway, captain in General Washington's army.

Apparently Mme. V. took a pretty lively interest in Captain Ordway, and the letter may provide an amusing sidelight upon the lady's history.

If you would care to see it, I shall be glad to bring it to you some day.

Very truly yours,

STEPHEN ORDWAY.

"This," said Cousin Ronald to himself, "is blackmail. 'An amusing sidelight—! Merciful Powers!'"

On a shelf before him stood a copy of "Mme. Van Der Dokjen and Her Milieu," chastely bound in gray and gold. As frontispiece there was a portrait of her, smiling; but how dignified, how superb! "An amusing sidelight!"

"Of course I shall write to this fellow, and bid him bring his letter," thought Cousin Ronald. "But I'll have to pay. Heaven knows what I shall have to pay!"

It was a truly horrible situation, for it combined the two greatest fears of his soul; the fear of injury to Mme. Van Der Dokjen, and the fear of spending much money. Because, as was mentioned before, Cousin Ronald was no spendthrift.

It was with the object of obtaining temporary relief from these painful matters that he opened his other letters. But instead of relief, here were more blows. It was the beginning of the month, and all the other envelopes contained bills—for groceries, for meat, for vegetables, for laundry. He added them together, and was appalled. He knew what it had cost Mme. Van Der Dokjen to run this house; this was five times as much.

For a moment, a sort of desperation seized upon him. He saw his hard earned—by his father—money being squandered and dissipated upon all sides. He saw himself paying these bills, and buying the com-

promising letter, and being left a ruined man.

"Merciful Powers!" he cried, with a groan.

Then he arose, and went to Cousin Winnie, and told her that he was a ruined man.

In that chapter on Mme. Van Der Dokjen "During the War," he had written with a certain eloquence about her benevolence, and about womanly sympathy in general; he had praised it, but not before had he encountered it. And he found it even sweeter than he had believed.

He and Cousin Winnie had a long talk. He assured her that he was confiding in her. To tell the truth, he told her nothing, but he spoke of his "troubles" in a large, vague fashion, he begged her to help him to economize. And she pitied him.

Lucy pitied him, too. But she was of a somewhat more practical nature.

"If he's ruined," she said, "it seems to me that we'd better go back to the city, and I'll get another job. And at least we'll have hot baths, and electric lights, and enough to eat."

"I could not leave your Cousin Ronald now," her mother declared, solemnly. "He says that any day now he will know. And then we can decide."

"Know what?" asked Lucy.

"Know the worst," her mother replied.

"Nothing," said Lucy, "could be worse than this."

Indeed, matters were bad, very bad. A black shadow lay over the household. Every morning Cousin Ronald came to the breakfast table, with a stern, set face, opened his letters, looked at Cousin Winnie, and said "Nothing!" She knew not what fateful news he expected, but she dreaded it, and yet wished it would come, that the blow would fall, the suspense be ended.

In the meantime, she did her utmost to aid the stricken man. Her economies were heroic. No need to detail them here. She grew thinner and paler, but she did not falter. Cousin Ronald told her frequently that he did not know what he could do without her coöperation, and that was a spur to the willing horse.

She did not like her child to endure all this, though. Again and again she urged Lucy to go back to the city, but Lucy refused. She would not leave her mother, and she, too, was sorry for Cousin Ronald; quite as sorry as her mother, though in a

different way. In her eyes he was not the distinguished and admirable figure Cousin Winnie thought him; he was simply a "poor, funny old darling." So, she remained, also waiting for the blow.

But no one suffered as did Cousin Ronald. He had written at once to this Stephen Ordway, requesting him to bring the letter at his "earliest convenience." No answer came; days went by, and Cousin Ronald wrote again. He waited and waited, in growing anguish. What, he asked himself, could be the reason for this silence? Awful fancies came to him.

His publishers wrote, asking if they might expect the manuscript of his new book in time for their spring list. He knew not how to reply. He dared not publish anything further about Mme. Van Der Dokjen while that letter was at large.

One night he had a dream. He dreamed that he went into Brentano's, to look at his book—"A Historic Cottage"—which had just been published, in gray and gold, like the former volume. He was, in his dream, examining this volume with justifiable pleasure, when his eye fell upon another book beside it—a slim little book in a scarlet jacket—"The Lady and the Soldier—An Amusing Sidelight Upon Mme. Van Der Dokjen."

It was a frightful dream, from which he awoke, cold and trembling.

"Whatever he asks, I'll pay it!" he thought. "But—Merciful Powers! It may be a sum beyond the very bounds of reason."

Still, he would pay. He would not see this noble woman held up to the world's ridicule. Whatever the cost, he would pay.

And, until he knew the cost, every cent must be saved. Very well; every cent was saved. Cousin Winnie assisted him in this. He waited. They all waited.

III

THE summer ran its course, and the great winds were beginning to blow. The leaves were falling fast. And, in the city, janitors were informing tenants that the furnace was being repaired; who so sorry as they for any delay in getting up a fine sizzling head of steam in the boiler these chilly mornings?

In the historic cottage there was, of course, not even a hope of a furnace. Cousin Winnie spent most of her time in the kitchen, where there was a coal stove,

and Cousin Ronald took long, healthful walks. So did Lucy; often they went together, but not on this especial afternoon. If they had, if Lucy had accompanied Cousin Ronald this afternoon, all might have been different.

Cousin Ronald, however, had remained in his study, communing, so to speak, with Mme. Van Der Dokjen. It was growing late when from his window he saw Lucy coming back from her walk. Her hair was blown about, her cheeks were glowing, she looked the most alive, warm, radiant creature imaginable.

And he was chilly and dispirited, and, seeing her, he thought that perhaps a walk might do all that for him. So he put on his hat and overcoat and took up his stick, and set forth. Not ten yards from his own gate he passed the man he so anxiously awaited, but he knew him not. He went on, in one direction, and the man went on in the other.

The man knocked at the door of the cottage, and Lucy opened it. She was still flushed from her walk, and in that dim, low-ceilinged room she seemed to him, with her fair hair that shone, her clear blue eyes, her scarlet jersey, almost impossibly vivid.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Does Mr. Phillips live here?"

"Oh, yes!" Lucy answered. "But he's just gone out. You might catch him if—"

"I'd be sure to miss him," the stranger declared, firmly. "If it won't bother you, may I wait? I'll just sit down out here." And he indicated a very historic settle which was built into the porch. All the winds that blew, blew here; an eddy of leaves whirled about his feet, now, and Lucy could scarcely hold the door open.

"You'd better come in," she suggested.

"Well, thank you," said he.

Fresh from the stir and color of the windy day, the sitting room seemed to him unpleasantly chill and dark as Lucy closed the door behind him. The fire was out, for economy's sake, and the tiny panes in the historic window did not admit much light.

"This is a pretty old house, isn't it?" he observed.

"Awfully!" said Lucy. "Sit down, won't you? That chair's a hundred and fifty years old. And it's one of the junior set, too!"

"I've heard about this place. Belonged to Mme. Van Der Dokjen, didn't it?"

"It still does!" said Lucy, grimly.

The stranger glanced at her.

"My name's Ordway," he explained.

"I wrote to Mr. Phillips, and he asked me to come. I've been away—on my vacation—or I'd have come before."

He wished that he had. He wished that he had come weeks ago. He felt that he had lost priceless time. And he looked as if he thought that.

Lucy had always liked red hair, and noses that turned up a little. This young man had red hair and that sort of nose; he was big, too, and broad-shouldered, and he looked cheerful. She asked him if he would care to look over the historic cottage and its antiques.

"Well—no, thanks," he said. "Tell you the truth, I've had all I want of historic things. My aunts, you know—they've got ancestors, and documents. If you don't mind, I'd rather just sit here and—"

He said "wait," but what he meant was "talk to you." The girl knew this. They did sit there, and they talked. The room grew dark; a very fine sunset was going forward in its proper place; indeed, at that moment Cousin Ronald was standing upon a hilltop, admiring it. But the laws of nature kept it away from the sitting room.

In the course of time Cousin Winnie was obliged to call for her daughter's aid. She came into the doorway; Mr. Ordway was presented to her; she spoke to him graciously, and gave him a candle, then she took away the radiant Lucy.

Candle or no candle, the room seemed darker than ever to Ordway. He began to walk about, but he knocked his shins against too many historic objects, and at last he paused, in a spot where he could see into the kitchen. He saw Cousin Winnie and Lucy preparing dinner by candlelight.

And he did not find it picturesque. He saw Lucy vigorously plying the pump beside the sink. He was not reminded of the old days, when home life had been so much finer. He thought:

"Good Lord! A pump! Candles! It's a shame! It's a darned shame! A girl like that! It's a darned shame!"

He blamed Mr. Ronald Phillips for all this.

When Cousin Ronald came home, he found a Stephen Ordway even more sinister than he had feared; a stern and very reticent young man, a very large one, too. By the light of the one candle in the sitting

room, he loomed, in the dictionary sense of the word—"loom: to appear larger than the real size, and indefinitely." His red hair had an infernal gleam.

"Mr.—er—Ordway?" said Cousin Ronald. "Yes—yes— I had—er—a communication from you?"

"You did, Mr. Phillips."

"Er—have you brought it with you?" asked Cousin Ronald, very low.

The young man said "Yes," but made no move to produce any document. He was thinking of something else.

"This house is old," he remarked; "but it seems pretty solid."

"Yes, indeed!" Cousin Ronald assented anxiously. "Yes, indeed!" He saw that the young man was leading up to something. "Suppose we step into my study?"

The young man was looking about him, at the walls, up at the ceiling.

"Yes," he asserted. "The place could be wired."

"W-wired?" said Cousin Ronald. "I don't—"

"I'm an electrical engineer," said Ordway. "I've been looking around here. *Think* what electricity could do for you here! Light—plenty of light—electric water heater—pump—dish washer—vacuum cleaner—percolator—stoves. You could have decent comfort!"

Cousin Ronald could not fathom the motives of the stranger, but he felt sure that they were profoundly subtle, and inimical to Cousin Ronald's welfare. Again he said:

"Will you—er—step into my study, sir?"

Ordway stepped, and when he got in there he loomed worse than ever.

"See here!" he said. "Let me do this job for you—wiring the house."

Cousin Ronald felt a sort of illness, a sort of faintness. He believed that he could comprehend the plot now. Instead of bluntly demanding a certain sum for Mme. Van Der Dokjen's letter, he was going to demand this job—this impious, this vandal job, of "wiring" the cottage. And the price—the price—

"I—er—fear it would be a somewhat costly undertaking," said Cousin Ronald.

Ordway thought of the wonderful girl, groping about in this dismal house, cold, forlorn, captive to an ogre relative. He was perhaps a little obsessed by electricity—a good thing for one of his profession.

He thought it the great hope of the modern world. And he could not endure the idea of a wonderful girl deprived of its benefits. He said:

"The question is—if anything can be too 'costly,' when it's a matter of human dignity and welfare."

A shudder ran along Cousin Ronald's spine. The moment had come. Very well; he was ready. He admitted, in his own heart, that nothing could be too costly where Mme. Van Der Dokjen's dignity was concerned. He was silent for a moment; then he raised his distinguished head.

"Mr. Ordway," he said, "name your price, sir!"

Ordway stared at him with a faint frown.

"I didn't mean that," he explained. What he had meant was that he would be glad to do this job for nothing. But he feared to affront Mr. Phillips. "It's—I'd enjoy doing it," he said earnestly.

Cousin Ronald could not endure the suspense any longer.

"Mr. Ordway," he said, "let us be direct, sir. That is ever my way. I have long been prepared for this eventuality. I am ready, sir, to consider the purchase of this letter. Be good enough to name your price."

IV

LIKE many another man before him, Cousin Ronald was ill-served by his own impatience. Ordway had come, intending to hand the letter over as a gift of no importance, but being asked to name his price put ideas into his head. He reflected. He reflected so long that Cousin Ronald grew still more impatient.

"I have been practicing the strictest economy," he announced. "I may say that I have endured something not short of actual discomfort, sir, in order that I might be in a position to meet any—er—reasonable terms—"

There was a knock at the door. It was Cousin Winnie.

"Your dinner!" she whispered. "It's ready!"

Cousin Ronald did some quick reflecting himself. If the young man could observe their strict economy for himself—

"Mr. Ordway, sir," he said, "will you favor us with your company at a very simple meal?"

"Thank you!" Ordway replied. "I'd be pleased to."

This dinner had, in Cousin Ronald's eyes, a sweet, old-fashioned charm. A fire burned now upon the hearth; the board was set out with Wedgwood and with Sheffield plate. And Cousin Ronald positively recreated Mme. Van Der Dokjen, describing her just as she had been, here in this very room.

But Ordway was not moved. He did not give the Wedgwood or the plate anything like the attention he gave to the economical dinner, and the late Mme. Van Der Dokjen was, to him, of very inferior merit to the living Lucy. All the time Cousin Ronald discoursed, Ordway was thinking of Lucy, deprived of electricity and of all the other privileges she so richly deserved.

"It's a darned shame!" he thought. "The old skinflint thinks more of that letter than he does of his own family. A darned shame!"

When the meal ended, Cousin Ronald suggested that Lucy sing, accompanying herself upon the spinet—an art she had recently acquired. He believed that this would soften the heart of the rapacious young man.

It did. It did, indeed. To the sweetly jangling spinet she sang some gentle old song. In firelight and candlelight—

The young man, watching her and hearing her, was quite as much moved as Cousin Ronald could have desired—but in the wrong direction.

Her song ended, Cousin Ronald and Ordway withdrew to the study, Cousin Winnie and her child to the kitchen. Twenty minutes passed; then Ordway reappeared. With a curtsy almost old-fashioned, Lucy went with him to the door, even across the threshold.

The wind slammed the door behind her, and for a few minutes she stood in the porch, talking to the young man. Cousin Winnie, in the kitchen, heard them; they were discussing a new play. Lucy said yes, she did like the theater, but she didn't go very often now. And she had heard "The Maddened Brute" spoken of as a wonderful play—a really big thing. Cousin Winnie missed a little here, owing to her duties; the next thing she heard was Lucy saying good night to Mr. Ordway.

It had been a very brief conversation, but Ordway, as he walked to the station in the windy dark, imagined that she had said a great deal. He thought, somehow,

that she had told him what a miserable existence she led in the historic cottage. What a *darned* shame!

V

LUCY was sitting at a small table by the dining room window. She had bought a tube of cement, and with it she was mending a varied assortment of antique china she had discovered in a cupboard. It was raining outside, a chill, steady downpour. And the room was dim and cold, and it was a dismal world.

"I wish I was thirty!" she thought. Because at that advanced age she believed that one could be content to live in a historic cottage, and not mind dullness, or rain, or anything, very much. At thirty she would be content to devote her life to the ruined Cousin Ronald and her heroic mother. Yet, in a way, she disliked the thought of being thirty. She disliked all her thoughts this afternoon.

"As far as that goes," she reflected, pursuing a certain familiar line, "I don't have to wait for anybody to invite me. I can take mother to see 'The Maddened Brute' this very Saturday, if I like. I've got enough money for that. Only, mother wouldn't like that sort of play. Anyhow, I don't care!"

Carefully she cemented a handle on an ancient sugar basin; then, setting it down to dry, she looked out of the window. The postman, in a rubber coat, was coming along the muddy road.

"I don't care!" she said again. She was not the sort of girl who waited with the slightest interest for letters that people had said they were going to write a week ago. Let them write, or not write; what cared she?

The postman came up on the porch and whistled, and the door opened—like a sort of cuckoo clock—and Cousin Winnie took in the letters. But what a long time she was in the hall!

"I suppose she's got another letter from a cousin," thought Lucy. "If there was anything for me— But I don't care, anyhow."

At last Cousin Winnie came into the dining room.

"A letter for you, Lucy," she said, handing it to her child, and vanished. With the utmost indifference Lucy opened her letter. It contained two tickets for "The Maddened Brute" for Saturday afternoon, an

explanation of the difficulty of getting them, and a very civil request that she and her mother meet Stephen Ordway for lunch at the Ritz before the play.

Not yet being thirty, the girl was pleased.

"Mother!" she called. "Isn't this nice? Listen—"

No answer. She got up and went into the kitchen, and found her mother standing by the window—just standing, doing nothing. This was alarming.

"Mother!" she said. "What's wrong?"

"Lucy—" said her mother. "Oh, Lucy! Oh, think of it! You can travel! You can have really nice clothes!" She was actually in tears.

"What is the matter?" cried Lucy. And then: "What's this?"

It was a check for five thousand dollars which Cousin Winnie extended in her trembling hand.

"Your—your Cousin Peter—left it to you!"

"Cousin Peter! Who's he?"

"You wouldn't remember," said Cousin Winnie. "A—a second cousin of—your grandfather's. Oh, Lucy! My dear, good child! Now you can go away!"

"But the check's made out to you, and it's signed L. B. Grey—"

"A legal form," Cousin Winnie explained. "I myself shall be well and amply provided for. This check is entirely for you, Lucy."

VI

SOMEHOW, "The Maddened Brute" was a disappointment. It was truly, as the advertisements declared it, a tense and gripping drama of life in the raw, but the characters were all so very violent that it was rather a relief than a tragedy when any one of them was silenced by stabbing, drowning, and so on.

Mr. Ordway was a little tense himself. When Cousin Winnie had seen him in the historic cottage, he had appeared such a cheerful young man, and now he was so odd, so silent. He ordered a superb luncheon at the Ritz; he provided them with an unparalleled box of chocolates; he was, in material ways, a most satisfactory host.

But spiritually he was depressing. In the theater he sat on the aisle, next to Cousin Winnie, and whenever the curtain went down he kept asking her about her plans, in a low and alarmingly serious voice.

"You won't stay in that house all winter, will you?" And he spoke of pneumonia, of bronchitis, of rheumatism, with a horrid eloquence. He said that candles often set houses on fire. He pictured such a disaster on a bitter midwinter night.

He spoke of thieves. He went on to escaped lunatics; and when the curtain rose on the third act and showed the *Maddened Brute* gibbering in a cellar by the light of one candle, she gasped.

"I must speak to Lucy!" she thought. "She's got to go away!" It was her policy not to interfere with her child, and she had waited very patiently for some word as to what Lucy meant to do with the check. But now she would wait no longer; she would speak to her about going away.

She had no opportunity, though. The young man insisted on taking them all the way back to the cottage.

It did, indeed, look sinister that evening, so small, so lonely under a stormy sky. Mad things could so easily be hiding behind those bushes. Of course they weren't, but they *could*.

"You must come in, Mr. Ordway," said Cousin Winnie.

"Thanks," he replied. "But—thanks, but I've got to go. Only, I wish you'd tell me first that you've decided not to stay here this winter."

"Oh, dear!" said Cousin Winnie, mildly. "I'm sure I can't."

"Why don't you go to Bermuda?" continued the young man. "Or Florida? You—both of you—look pale."

Although a little tiresome, Cousin Winnie thought the young man's solicitude rather touching. But Lucy answered him bluntly.

"We can't afford things like that. We're going to stay here—"

"But five thousand dollars ought—" he began, vehemently, and stopped short. There was a blank silence.

"Mother!" said Lucy, reproachfully.

"My dear!" said Cousin Winnie. "Naturally, I never mentioned—"

There was another silence.

"Mr. Ordway," Lucy began. "What made you say 'five thousand dollars'?"

"Oh! It—it just came into my head," he replied.

"It couldn't," said Lucy, coldly. "I'd like to know. Will you tell me, please, why you thought I had five thousand dollars?"

Another silence.

"Because," said Ordway, "I sent it."

"Oh!" cried mother and daughter.

"But—listen, please!" said the young man, in great distress. "It's—if you'll just listen. You see, I had a letter written by this Mme. Van Der What's Her Name—and Mr. Phillips wanted it—badly. And when I saw how—what it was like in the cottage—and he seemed to have all he wanted to spare for that darn fool letter. I made him pay five thousand for it. Please! Just a minute! It really *belongs* to you. You're his relatives."

"But—Cousin Peter!" cried Lucy.

"I made him up," said Cousin Winnie, faintly. "The letter said—from an anonymous friend—and I thought—perhaps your Cousin Ronald himself— But now, of course, Lucy will return it to you at once, Mr. Ordway."

"I can't," said Lucy, with a sob. "You told me this Cousin Peter yarn—and you said you were amply provided for—and I'm young and healthy—and the poor thing did look so wretched—"

"Lucy! What 'poor thing'? Oh, Lucy, what have you done?"

"You told me he was ruined," said Lucy. "And he did look so cold, and wretched, and dismal—and I rather like him."

"Lucy! You didn't—"

"I did!" cried Lucy in despair. "I gave it to Cousin Ronald!"

"He accepted it?" asked Ordway, in a terrible voice.

"He had to," Lucy replied. "I put it in an envelope and wrote—'from an admirer of Mme. Van Der Dokjen'!"

No one spoke for a time.

"I know it was foolish," said Lucy, finally. "But the day I got it, I felt so—I can't describe it—so—well, so healthy, you know, and able to do anything I wanted. And he was sitting in there, writing his poor silly old book, with one candle. And his gray hair, and his funny little beard—and the way he clears his throat—sort of baaing—like a lamb. And I thought he was ruined."

"Foolish!" repeated Cousin Winnie, and with that she walked briskly up the path.

"I really am a little bit sorry," Lucy remarked.

"Sorry for what?" inquired Ordway.

"Well," said she. "For you, I guess. You must feel pretty flat, just now."

"Thank you," said he. "I do."

"It was a nasty, condescending thing."

"It wasn't meant like that," he declared.

"What I—"

The door of the cottage opened, and Cousin Winnie called:

"Don't stand there in the cold!"

"Mother says—" Lucy began.

"I heard her," said Ordway. "Thing is—what do *you* say?"

"Well, I'd—I'd like you to come," said Lucy.

VII

THEN they went in. They found Cousin Winnie standing by a console in the hall, with a strange look on her face.

"Really!" said she. "This is— Look at this!"

And she held out to them a check for five thousand dollars, drawn by Cousin Ronald to her order.

"Listen!" she said, and began to read:

"MY DEAR WINNIE:

"An unexpected stroke of good fortune enables me to tender to you this small token of my profound appreciation of your kindness toward me in a dark hour. I beg that you will honor me by accepting it.

"Furthermore, it occurs to me that this cottage, hallowed as it is to me by its associations, is scarcely suitable in its present condition for a winter residence for ladies accustomed to modern conveniences. I shall endeavor to arrange for the installation of electricity, and I am this afternoon going into the city to consult with an expert upon the advisability of a small furnace.

"I shall be somewhat late in returning. Indeed, my dear Winnie, I should prefer that you read this in my absence, and to consider—"

"That's all that matters," said Cousin Winnie, hastily, folding up the letter.

"No! Read the rest!" her child firmly insisted.

"No," Cousin Winnie asserted. "I—I prefer not."

"But why?" Lucy began, and then stopped, staring at her mother.

"Mother!" the girl exclaimed.

"Don't be silly!" said Cousin Winnie, severely.

"Merciful Powers!" Lucy remarked, with a shocking mimicry of Cousin Ronald's manner. "I fear this is another compromising letter!"

"It is not, at all!" Cousin Winnie declared indignantly. "Nothing could be more honorable and—"

Then suddenly they all began to laugh. Cousin Ronald, coming up the path, heard them. He thought it was an agreeable thing to hear, suggestive of that fine, old-fashioned home life.

Tourist-Class

IN THIS TRANSATLANTIC CROSSING YOUNG CUPID AND OLD NEPTUNE CONSPIRE TO UNRAVEL A SKEIN OF LOVE

By John Mosher

GENERAL KNICKERBACKER raised his glass of champagne—pre-war—for the last toast of the Thanksgiving dinner, to Aunt Natalie, who lived in Paris, and had been overlooked, and beamed down the long table at this great gathering of the Herrendeen-Van Cleve-Knickerbacker clans.

He beamed at all these relatives and connections dutifully assembled on this memorable day, at old Grandma Herrendeen, who wouldn't see many more of them, and at young Grandson Bromfield, who was getting his early training for parties in the home as it were. The general even included poor little Cousin Julia Harper in his liberal radiance.

Julia was glad that that was the last toast, and that the everlasting dinner was over for that year at least. Little did she dream, or any one else there, that in ten minutes they would all be assembled again to toast her humble self.

At the moment she was only thankful that she could escape the noisy crowd, and she made her way straight to the library, away from them all. Even the library wasn't empty. Mr. Sims was there, poring over some dull papers.

Mr. Sims had managed to make himself useful in the family law firm, even to the point of squeezing his name on the letter-headings, although he was a newcomer in the town, altogether an upstart, of no position or family at all. But now and then that sort of person can be useful, even to our best families.

He scowled at Julia, openly. Apparently he thought she was one of the maids. That sort of thing had happened to Julia before in her rich relatives' houses.

He got up at once, muttering that it was impossible to do any work in this house,

and stalked out. Julia felt very apologetic, but it was too late to do anything about it, and certainly it was a relief to be alone in this dim room.

She was so done in by the racket of the family dinner, although she knew it was a great honor for them to remember her every year like this, that she leaned against the window, very worn and lonely, and never heard her cousin twice-removed enter, that young Bromfield Herrendeen Van Cleve, who was to profit so by the family training as host, until he was beside her and had stammered:

"Say, Julia, I'm not much I guess, but do you want to marry me?"

"Bromfield! Me—I—you want to marry me?"

He did.

He kissed her. He kissed her again, and then the general came in, and saw what was up, and instantly bellowed his congratulations.

He grabbed them both by the hands and led them into the big drawing-room, and ordered up more champagne—pre-war. A volley of congratulations ensued from the admiring relatives.

"To Julia and Bromfield; to the bride and groom."

"What a solution!"

"Isn't she sweet!"

"How handsome he is. Dear, he's the handsomest member of the family."

"And a quiet, sensible wife is all he needs—"

"Who knows our ways—"

"One of us—"

"He looks like an angel, but—"

"Oh, yes, Julia is just the wife—"

"Of course, they're young, but Bromfield, with all that money—"

"And those looks—"

"Yes, indeed. Marriage is the very thing—"

"Reset the blue diamond."

Then the general, who liked to gesture in the grand manner, and remembered that improvident Julia would need pocket money in her new illustrious position, produced ten yellow one-hundred-dollar bills as the first gift to the bride.

Even Mr. Sims appeared in the midst of the festivity, and was permitted a glass of champagne, and was very solicitous in presenting his felicitations to the bride. For the family all looked upon her as a bride already. There was to be no long engagement. That was settled immediately. The sooner Bromfield was married the better. Every one agreed on that point.

Julia was so dazed she hardly knew what was happening. But she remembered that kiss. That remained clear in her heart. Through all the confusion, in all the glare of the limelight, for the first time turned upon her, that memory steadied her. Nothing else mattered. She was in a trance of happiness.

She listened meekly late that night to her Aunts Winanda, Alicia, and Cora, and to her grandmother, in their triumph. They reminded her of her former desires to go out and earn her living, as if she were a girl of no family or position, just because she happened to belong to the poor branch.

She let them congratulate each other on the success of their upbringing which had made her worthy of such a match. If it had been dull for her before, had it not been worth it?

Worth it? Anything was worth it. They had been right. Never could she deny it now. She had thought herself bullied by a family tradition, and this had been her reward.

When they had left her, and she was alone in her room, her face flushed crimson again with the delight of that kiss from that blue-eyed, blond-haired angel, her angel Bromfield. And, before, she had never dared admit then to herself that she thought him good looking.

Bromfield must go back to Harvard, where optimists hoped he would be graduated in the spring. Julia thought she could not endure the parting. She would not see him again until the Christmas holidays. It was cruel, terrible. He was shy and respectful, and promised to write every day.

"I don't know what you see in me,

Julia," he said. "You're too good for me—honest, I'm no saint, but I'll try, Julia, I swear I'll try—"

"My dearest," then she, too, became very shy, and their last kiss under the general's eye was a bit fumbled.

He was gone. In twenty-eight days he would be back. She checked them off on the calendar. But they went faster than she had expected. Time had disappeared, and all the ordinary things of life were transfigured.

II

SHE had checked off ten days. The diamond hadn't yet come back from the jeweler's when Bromfield missed sending his first daily letter. All his letters were somewhat alike, but one doesn't demand variety in angels.

They usually read:

DEAREST JULIA:

I hope you are well. I am working pretty hard, and I'll be glad when Christmas gets here. One of the fellows had a birthday yesterday, and I got a headache this morning. I'm awful sick of school, anyway, and I'm glad I'm going to be married and be done with it, *et cetera, et cetera*.
With love,
BROMFIELD.

Then he skipped another day. On the third day Julia read in the newspaper, along with the rest of the world, that Bromfield Herrendeen Van Cleve, heir to the Knickerbacker and Van Cleve millions, had eloped with, and wedded, a young person named Sweeny, remotely connected with the stage.

The shock of it was so great that it killed the general before he had time to change his will, which left everything to "My grandson, Bromfield, and to his wife, God bless her," a line properly appreciated by Mrs. Van Cleve, *nee* Sweeny.

The family did not forget Julia in their general humiliation. "Poor child, she did care for him," they said. They held long consultations as to what they could do to make her forget. Aunt Natalie even came to the front, with that knack so amazing in transatlantic relatives, of knowing what is happening at home, and invited Julia to come to visit her in Paris.

Aunts Alicia, Winanda, and Cora knew what Natalie was up to. They had their ideas of Natalie. The impudence of her, expecting anything in the general's will. They didn't pass on the invitation to Julia.

The family began to think that they had

been entirely mistaken about Julia. She didn't behave in the least as they expected. In the first place, she declared that she had broken her engagement with Bromfield before his elopement.

Later she announced that she had known all along about Miss Sweeny, and that she approved of the marriage for Bromfield. At last she denied that she had ever been engaged to Bromfield, saying that the family had taken them so by surprise that they had no time to explain.

There were plenty of discrepancies in her stories, and they sagged with inconsistencies, but they could not refute her. The family saw the convenience of believing her. It removed some of the stigma from Bromfield's act, it relieved them from more serious obligation to Julia. Was it possible that Julia had been in league with Bromfield against them all?

During the winter Julia gave no hint of what she was planning, nor indeed that she was planning anything. She had one letter from Aunt Natalie, which she didn't show to any one, but as long as Aunt Natalie didn't have the vulgarity and bad taste to try to break the general's will the family didn't worry about her.

One evening, at a quarter to ten—all conclaves, however grave, had to end at ten in her grandmother's house—Julia announced to the assembled group of relatives that she was going away on a trip.

"You may be interested to know," she added, with a touch of humor that was new to her.

"Where do you want to go, dear?" began Aunt Cora Van Cleve. She knew how to handle difficult situations.

"The expense!" groaned Aunts Alicia and Winanda by rote. It was a thing they said in their sleep: "Ah, the expense!"

Julia produced an envelope from behind the mantel clock.

"This is my steamer ticket," she said. "I sail a week from to-morrow. It is tourist-class."

Aunt Cora, alone capable of action, reached for the ticket and examined it closely.

"This tourist-class?" she said. "It's really the steerage, isn't it?"

"We can't go with you," cried Aunt Alicia.

"In spite of that, I must go."

"Not alone, Julia!"

Julia bowed.

"Mr. Sims is going on the same boat. He will be first-class. He doesn't know I am going, and I shall be obliged if you won't tell him. But if there are any difficulties I shall consult him as my legal adviser. Aunt Natalie will meet me in Paris. You see, I have carefully thought out everything."

"Mr. Sims is going first-class, and you, Julia, third!"

"Yes," said Julia; "but, as I say, he needn't know anything about it."

"Aunt Natalie is not just the person we should choose—"

"I promise to trouble her as little as possible," said Julia.

Then the mantel clock rattled ten times, and the grandfather's clock wheezed in unison, and her grandmother arose from her chair. There was left a week in which to tell Julia that she was disgracing her family.

But that night Julia learned that she need fear nothing of that sort from her grandmother. The old woman came into Julia's room after she was in bed.

"Darling," she said, "I am growing so old that I am beginning almost to understand young people." She looked up at the portrait of a great-aunt who had flirted outrageously with a very great man of her time. "Your most beautiful ancestress also defied the traditions of her family, and now we are very proud of her. I think, dear, you are beginning to look like her."

"She is the beauty of our family, grandmother, dear."

"There are many kinds of beauty, Julia, and beauty comes and goes." She turned back from the doorway. "Don't say anything of this to your aunts, dear. It will only annoy them, and make them think I am more feeble-minded and senile than they do already."

III

"ANYTHING I hate is dishonesty in business," said the large lady in taffeta. "The steamer office told me I'd have this state-room alone."

"Miss Harper," read the steward; "lower berth," and he departed.

There was a distinct air of hostility in the cabin. Julia felt she was an intruder, but she didn't know what she could do about it. She had never met any one like this woman. Van Cleves, Knickerbackers, or Harpers never came in contact with people like this.

"Let me tell you one thing, Miss Harper—if that is your real name—that the minute this boat leaves the dock I'm going to be sick, and sick I'll be till we land on the other side. Shall I, or shall I not, have the lower berth?"

From the upper berth one could peer out straight through the porthole.

"Oh, I prefer the upper berth," Julia declared.

The lady in taffeta relaxed.

"I like company when they're real ladies," she said. "My name's Bush. Amy Bush, of Waukegan, Illinois. Is this your first crossing? I thought so. It's my seventh. My first, of course, third class. I wish you could see some of the cabins I've had, all done in pink and gold. I was a buyer for Silberg's, before I met Bush."

She shook out a black satin with a point-setta on the girdle.

"I won't have much chance to wear this down here, but you never can tell who you'll run up against first-class. I'm running over to see my son. He married a French girl. Imagine! They're terrible about money, those French. It's been money, ma, ever since. When I got the last little prayer I said: 'This time the joke's on you; it's not money, but ma, this trip.'"

Distinctly, Mrs. Bush was a new experience to Julia. But she remembered that that was what she was seeking.

"I suppose there's a deck somewhere," she ventured.

"Don't count on it," said Mrs. Bush, but in a most friendly way she took her arm, and suggested they take a look around.

At the dining room they stopped.

"Those palms make me cry," said Mrs. Bush, and then she paused to listen to what a young man was saying to the steward.

"I want a ticket to the second sitting."

"There's a table, if you don't mind being alone."

"Just what I do want," said the young man.

"Hasn't he a strong face?" commented Mrs. Bush, and she, too, sallied forward to the steward.

"What about places for me and my friend? Second sitting, and that table over there will do fine."

Julia was shocked.

"He wants to be alone," she cried.

"He don't own the Atlantic," retorted Mrs. Bush, "even if he thinks he does."

While Julia wanted, above all things, to get away from everything that suggested her old life, she hadn't intended to force her presence upon unwilling gentlemen. To be sure, nothing on earth could have been more opposed to the customs she had been brought up in. She could see the aunts aghast at such a performance. Evidently when you ventured forth into the world things happened to you that you didn't always foresee.

Still, she had to sit somewhere, and there was no reason why, as Mrs. Bush said, the young man should have a table all by himself. However, she waited until the last call for dinner, watching from the deck New York's banks and insurance buildings fade into a magical haze of romantic turrets, before she slid into her place. But she couldn't ignore the young man's presence entirely. Mrs. Bush saw to that.

"Thought you'd jumped overboard," said Mrs. Bush. "Do you mind passing the rolls? The poor things are in front of the gentleman."

She went on, nodding casual thanks to the gentleman.

"Have you seen the crowd in second-class? My, they're common! I've asked the waiter to get me a first-class passenger list. I'm sure to know some one up there. I don't mind this tourist-class just for the experience."

The young man arose, and left without so much as a nod. Mrs. Bush had to send a laugh after the dull creature.

"I bet his home town got up a community chest to be rid of him, and let them have a chance to cheer up."

She leaned forward to get a better look at his departing back.

"Unhappy love affair," she decided. "Traveling to forget. Well, I don't blame the girl."

The young man never condescended a word throughout the meals of the whole next day.

Julia had to agree that his manners were not of the best.

Bromfield had had perfect manners. Indeed, Julia had never met any one before who didn't have perfect manners, except possibly Mr. Sims, and he was only a business acquaintance.

Mrs. Bush thought the young man had the worst manners of any one she had ever met, and her experience was obviously

more extended than Julia's. She found a little group of friends to discuss him with, all united by the common bond of many crossings in pink and gold suites.

All these people were much too traveled to bother about a quiet little thing like Julia, who had never been away from home before. She was sitting alone next evening in the dining salon, listening to the third-class orchestra play a bit from "Trovatore," when this uncouth, grim table companion of theirs actually came up and spoke to her. He said that the music was pretty awful, and that they might go up and take a turn on deck.

And Julia Harper forgot her aunts, and said she would.

Through the windows of the second-class floated the tender strains of a popular song.

The young man was not in the least hindered by class distinctions. He went boldly forward, and Julia found herself on the promenade deck. More music here, a lighter variety, a girl singing, a first-class cabaret voice.

Even the promenade deck wasn't enough for the young man. He took Julia's arm, and swung her up a companionway to the boat deck. This was dark, remote, strange, and when they leaned over the rail, wedged in between two lifeboats, the sea, luminous, glinting, was far, far, miles and miles below. The railing was frail, they thought, and they commented on how easily one might slide overboard up here.

Otherwise there wasn't much conversation, except that the young man said his name was Ringling, Robert, and that he was a lawyer in the firm of Rogers, Lee and Bell, in Lincoln, Nebraska, which only gave him the routine, unimportant work to do, and he was pretty sick of it, and this was his first vacation in ten years.

Mrs. Bush would have considered the evening a complete failure, and would have had to laugh if she had known how they acted up there on that dark deck.

Finally they walked on to the house where the pets were kept, and an ancient mariner showed them a Russian wolf hound and a trick terrier.

"One of my great-uncles had a wolf hound like that," said Julia.

"He's worth a cool thousand," said the mariner, appraising her cynically, "but any time you two want to come up, you're welcome. I know it gets slow down there in the stern."

Ringling seemed to think this funny, and was still chuckling about it as they descended to the promenade deck, still a big vacant race course. Then suddenly Julia saw Mr. Sims.

IV

He stepped out of the smoking room, flicking ashes off his broadcloth, an ambassadorial figure, not at all the subdued, cautious Mr. Sims of the office. This time he didn't mistake her for one of the maids, but on the other hand, for one of the salon-class passengers.

"Well, well, Miss Harper, I wondered where you kept yourself."

Aunts Winanda, Alicia, and Cora had told him to look out for her; but they had been unable to acknowledge that she was down in the abysses of the ship. She had to elucidate that at once.

"What an experience for a Harper. You are a very independent young woman, Miss Harper."

He paused to consider this novel aspect of her nature, and then appraised Ringling.

"There seems to be quite a social life there. We're comparatively very dull. You must permit me, Miss Harper, to enjoy some of the privileges of—ah—your part of the boat."

Certainly Mr. Sims was being only courteous. But suddenly Julia felt that she didn't want him on the boat; that she was very sorry he was there. Strangely, too, she knew that Mr. Ringling felt the same way.

Nobody made any but the most conventional remarks; but very clearly and undeniably there was an element of hostility in the trio such as Julia had never known before. And it was Mr. Sims's fault.

Away from home Mr. Sims appeared no longer insignificant, but altogether a powerful—yes, sinister—person. Every one seemed different away from home, Julia was beginning to learn; but Mr. Sims seemed more so than any one else—unless possibly herself.

She and Ringling had been in a subdued way care-free and cheerful above, but now their good spirits were chilled. They left Mr. Sims, and walked on silently, and Mr. Ringling left her with hardly a word.

He apparently regretted his brusqueness next morning, for he felt it required an apology. They had a long talk of explana-

tion, out of which it developed that he felt she had deceived him. That was the verb he used.

It seemed he had thought she was a very nice, quiet little person, a school-teacher, or a librarian, some one who could understand his problems, being poor also. He hadn't seen any one just like her, to be sure, in Nebraska, but that was no objection in his eyes.

But he had never imagined that she was an heiress deliberately traveling tourist-class for the experience.

"But I'm not," said Julia, staring at the strange creature.

"I know all about you," he said, and proceeded to explain that she was a society girl who took life very seriously, and made all the young bloods from Yale uncomfortable by refusing to marry any of them until they proved their worth by honest toil.

Then she had discovered conditions in the slums, and had made the family miserable by discussing the inequality of wealth at the dinner table, and had wanted to adopt some immigrants, and give away her inheritance, as it was tainted money. Then she had a poetry class in a settlement. Then she wanted to live with the masses; but that was too much for the family.

Suddenly she had heard of this tourist-class, just when she had to run over for her spring outfit, and that beautifully combined the two. She could study the lower classes and get her Paris clothes at the same time.

"And I'm the first specimen of the masses you've discovered."

"Oh, you're wrong," said Julia, "I'm one of those people they've got warnings up against who take all your money at cards."

"Anyway, I never met any one just like you before."

"You're unusual yourself," she declared.

He was unusual. So worn and haggard, and very grave, yet with a charming humor, she decided. She couldn't imagine any one more unlike a blond, blue-eyed angel. Yet he was good looking in a way. Strong looking! She was in her cabin with Mrs. Bush, thinking out some word to describe him, when a note came from Mr. Sims, reading:

DEAR MISS HARPER:

-Mrs. Crocker, a client of mine, had to give up sailing at the last moment—a friend of your Aunt Cora's—and she wanted me to give you her cabin.

She didn't know that you were sailing tourist-class, of course, but she said that an extra cabin was often useful for clothes and things. I have made all the arrangements, and you can move up at once. I am delighted at this opportune coincidence, for I am sure you will be more comfortable here, and the novelty of your experience down there must be wearing off. Please count upon me to be of any service that I can.

Julia wrote across the bottom of the note: "Thank you, but I really like it very much down here," and sent it back to Mr. Sims.

"I must get a little first-class stationery myself," Mrs. Bush murmured vaguely. "I simply haven't been able to keep up with my correspondence."

"Perhaps I can get you some," said Julia, thinking that this favor she could ask of Mr. Sims.

It didn't please Mrs. Bush.

"I have a friend in the first-class myself, but I haven't had time to call yet," she said, "there are such refined people down here."

V

MR. SIMS was not to be dismissed with a mere note. Down he came to urge her to reconsider. Mr. Ringling at once withdrew with cold aloofness. But Mr. Sims didn't consider Mr. Ringling. He refused to take her refusal as final. Mrs. Crocker would be so hurt.

He was very hurt himself; disappointed beyond words. At all events the stateroom remained vacant, and if she changed her mind she could move in at once. He respected her independence of spirit enormously, of course.

Then he insisted on her coming to lunch with him just to give him the opportunity to tell how much he admired her. He was very suave and very flattering.

Julia had had few compliments in her existence, except on her discretion and maidenly propriety. Now to be told by an adept gentleman of prominence in the law, and a well-known way with juries, that she was a daring and stimulating young woman of unusual charm and distinction, was not without its attraction.

He was entertaining, too, about their fellow passengers, and given to sly, respectful quips about her relatives at home, at which she had to be amused. Altogether it was pleasant, now and again, slipping up to the Ritz restaurant for a bite of lunch or a dinner with Mr. Sims, and she began to

think she had done him an injustice to have had that unaccountable dislike for him on their first meeting on board. She forgot that he had ever mistaken her for one of the maids.

"Who's your gentleman friend?" asked Mrs. Bush.

"A friend of the family's."

Mrs. Bush thought this reply dignified, but not original. "These quiet ones," she reflected, but she treated Julia with new respect.

Julia was learning that, as the story books say, a girl has only to leave home to have all sorts of things happen to her. There was Mr. Ringling. In spite of Mr. Sims she saw quite a bit of Mr. Ringling. They made it rather a custom to run up to the boat deck evenings to visit the cats and dogs, and comment on the aspect of the sea from such a height.

Mr. Ringling hadn't recovered from his distaste for Mr. Sims. In fact, it seemed to grow every day. Julia couldn't understand it.

She told Mr. Sims about Mr. Ringling, the firm he was in, and so forth. And Mr. Sims, it developed, knew Mr. Lee of the firm very well, and promised to speak a good word for Mr. Ringling, since Julia thought him such a worthy young man, though he confessed himself somewhat surprised that such an established firm should acquire a young man with so few natural advantages.

Julia couldn't imagine what he meant by that. She was convinced, herself, that Mr. Ringling would end in the Supreme Court.

"Kindness itself," murmured Mr. Sims, "always seeing the best side of people."

But if Mr. Sims didn't appreciate Mr. Ringling, his comments were mild compared with Mr. Ringling's on the subject of Mr. Sims. Men were strange. Julia wished that great-aunt could give her a hint or two as to how the very great man of her time had carried on.

Then Mr. Sims was able to do her a great favor. It wasn't just the one he had expected to do, but she was very grateful. It came about through Mrs. Bush.

Mrs. Bush had suffered a great blow. She had been insulted by Mrs. Weisenberger. Mrs. Weisenberger was the friend unearched in the first-class. Mrs. Bush had gone up to revel with her in girlhood memories.

Alas, Mrs. Weisenberger had forgotten

her girlhood. "She's had enough time to," sobbed Mrs. Bush. She had cut her flat, the cut all the more scathing as Mrs. Weisenberger had seen her climb up the companionway from the tourist-class.

Julia tried to console her, but had to go up for a promenade with old Mr. Sims, in order to get back early for a talk with young Mr. Ringling.

Mr. Sims was very urbane that day.

"We are getting to be very good friends, Julia, aren't we? At least, I hope we are. Oh, I had the most painful feeling that the little girl looked on me with distrust. You didn't hide that, my dear. Well, well, we shall do all we can to alter that."

Then he pulled her before a window opening into a cabin, which was all pink and gold.

"Cozy little place," said Mr. Sims, "and the owner refuses to occupy it. She prefers to remain in her own delightful state-room in the third-class."

Pink and gold! The idea came to Julia at once.

"Is that room really at my disposal?"

"Absolutely."

"It seems too bad that no one should have it."

"Absolutely," repeated Mr. Sims in his hearty innocence.

"I shall use it," said Julia.

"Sensible little lady," cried Mr. Sims, patting her shoulder.

"For a friend," added Julia.

The patting stopped. Mr. Sims forgot his tact.

"For Mr. Ringling?"

"Oh, no, not Mr. Ringling. For Mrs. Bush—"

She explained how Mrs. Bush was accustomed to such cabins, and could really enjoy it. And Mr. Sims was aware that it would only seem ill-favored of him to object. But he looked at Julia a little more curiously.

Mrs. Bush had no hesitation about accepting the favor.

"It's just a dream," she declared, until the arrival of her luggage brought reality.

"I know what you're up to, you sly puss," whispered Mrs. Bush. "You and Ringling, having your meals all alone down there!"

VI

Of course Julia hadn't thought of that side of the matter at all.

But there was no doubt they could talk more freely, now that Mrs. Bush had moved to the quarters she was accustomed to. And they were finding more and more things to talk about. Julia had had no idea that her own uneventful life could seem so interesting to any one, and on her part she had never met any one before who had his own way to make, and who was so sure to make it as Mr. Ringling.

Next day early Mrs. Bush sent a note down. She was afraid to come down herself to the third-class, on account of disease, but Julia must come up at once. It was most important.

Julia found her stretched out in a violet peignoir she was taking her daughter-in-law, but might as well get some use out of herself.

"My dear, you'll die, when I tell you," she cried. "Sady Weisenberger looked in that window. I was sitting right here, and the maid was in the room—the service is terrible up here. I said to the maid: 'Just draw that curtain, please.' Sady turned yellow."

Mrs. Bush had to have a good laugh. But then she explained that that wasn't the important reason of her note.

"My dear, I had coffee with Sims last night. Julia Harper, you're all wrong about that bird. It's marriage he wants. He wants to marry you."

Julia explained how ridiculous this was. She said that she knew nothing about Mr. Sims's plans, nor did they interest her, but that she on her part had definitely decided never to marry.

"Well, if you won't trust me—" was all that Mrs. Bush could say to this. "And if you take that Ringling, who hasn't a penny, when such a fine, established gentleman as Sims— Oh, young girls don't know what they do. It just makes me cry."

Julia had no sooner left Mrs. Bush than she ran into Mr. Sims, who urged her to have a morning mineral water with him. He certainly was assiduous. Julia could not help but be aware of that.

He regretted the long hard life he had had, which had enabled him to meet so few charming young ladies for pleasant night chats, except in a business way, concerning breach-of-promise suits, and the like, which he had dabbled in, before his alliance with the big Van Cleve firm. In fact, she felt very sorry that she couldn't accept his invitation to the dance that evening, but she

had another engagement, and it was next to their last night at sea.

Mr. Sims was more urgent than the situation seemed to require. Julia had to tell him several times that as she had made the engagement she couldn't possibly back out of it now. It didn't seem to her that that would be honest. Of course she had to be honest.

When he grew more insistent she was seized with that same dislike for him that she had had on their first meeting at sea. Naturally, she didn't let him see that, but she felt it clearly none the less. In spite of all his flattery and genuine kindness, she didn't like him, and she was afraid of him. He seemed so smooth and so capable.

She was glad that the trip was approaching its end, and determined that, once on land, she should see nothing more of him. It would have surprised her then to know that the very next day she should feel tenderly toward him, and even be seeking him out to ask a favor of him.

Surprised her, perhaps! Yet she was growing used to strange things in life. Wasn't it strange that she, who had had so few attentions at home, should find herself suddenly pursued by two men at once? There was nothing of the coquette in Julia, but it was a startling and not unpleasant sensation.

That evening on the boat deck, however, she forgot all about Mr. Sims. Mr. Ringling had some things to say that required all her attention. They were rather crowded upon each other in a corner between a lifeboat and the rail, although they could easily have moved out upon the deck without fear of interruption. But this solution never occurred to them. They seemed to find the corner adequate, even spacious.

For Mr. Ringling had the most interesting things to divulge. First, that he had never seen any one like her in Nebraska, as he had said before. Then, that he had never seen any one like her anywhere. Then, that he had always hoped to meet just such a person. Finally, he had to blurt it right out that he had loved her at first sight, and never had loved any one before, and never would again, and that she must marry him, and again that he loved her.

Then the dog man, who had spied them, shouted for them to come and see the trick terrier beg for his supper.

They got back again in their corner, and then Julia explained that she thought her-

self in love once before, but that she knew now that that had all been a girlish infatuation, a childhood romance, which, it seemed, Ringling understood perfectly, and the interview ended satisfactorily, somewhere well on toward dawn, for both parties.

VII

THUS it was that next evening, before a last visit to the boat deck, Julia, with a heart full of tenderness toward all the world, included Mr. Sims in her general good will, thinking of him only as a kind, pathetic old gentleman who certainly meant to do his best.

The idea came to her that she might be able to help her Ringling in her small way, which was a delightful possibility and added to her own sense of importance. She would press Mr. Sims to bespeak his admiration of Ringling to that Mr. Lee, so that Mr. Lee might realize how fortunate his firm was in such a possession.

Not that she would announce any sort of engagement. That was irrelevant, and none of Mr. Sims's affair. She would simply explain how convinced she was of the young man's particular ability.

As it was the first time on the trip that she had on her own part sought out Mr. Sims, he may have taken more for granted than he was justified in doing. Certainly he jumped up from his steamer chair with juvenile agility as he saw her coming toward him, and certainly he did not conceal his pleasure at the sight of her, nor was he unaware that she was striking with a new charm, a new radiance and sparkle about her—no more the poor little cousin sliding away into libraries.

But clever as he was, Mr. Sims was misled for the moment. He only thought that his attentions on the trip were beginning to be appreciated as they ought to be, and therefore that it was time that he revealed a matter of some importance which he had been guarding until a propitious occasion arose. For Mr. Sims was a great believer in the importance of the right psychological moment.

And when he saw this girl, happy and radiant, and all friendliness, he decided immediately that it was the right moment to go into some business matters of importance, which he had been thus harboring all the trip.

So both these people, each with quite

different ideas of what the other was thinking, withdrew for a pleasant chat in a corner of the palm room.

And Julia, looking at him, was sure that he intended to do everything he could in a friendly way for her, and that undoubtedly a mere word from him would be enough to make Mr. Lee aware of Ringling's true and sterling value.

And Mr. Sims, watching the bright girl before him, decided definitely that it was time he settled down, and that such a young wife would set the final seal of success upon his career.

So for a moment they were silent, neither knowing exactly how to begin.

But Mr. Sims would never be long at loss for an opening in however complicated a situation. In this case indeed he decided after the briefest hesitation to go straight to the point.

The palm room on an ocean liner was hardly the place for a declaration of the tenderer feelings, but it was ideal for just such a business talk as he had in mind now. Whether the business talk or the tender declaration should come first in sequence had presented something of a problem to him for some time, but he now decided that the business matter would only pave the way for the other, simplify it, further its success.

"Your Cousin Bromfield—!" he began.

Julia jumped. Bromfield was so far from her thoughts at the moment that his name was like a small thunderbolt, quite throwing her off the track.

Mr. Sims smiled. He enjoyed such surprises. He knew that they unsettled the victims' equilibrium, broke down various defensive trickeries, and inclined them to expansiveness and candor, and Mr. Sims valued candor in others.

"Yes, I have wanted an opportunity to speak of Bromfield to you." He beamed about the palm room. "This seems as good a time as any we shall have before landing."

He saw that Julia was too surprised to offer any interruption at the moment, so he went on with assurance.

"Bromfield," he said, "has awakened to a sense of the outrageous treatment he gave you. He wishes to do all in his power to rectify it. He consulted me on the matter. I was touched—touched—by the young man's delicacy of sentiment. He feels that his grandfather, in his somewhat

inaccurately worded will, intended that you should benefit; that when he wrote, 'To Bromfield and his wife, God bless her,' he meant you, not the late Miss Sweeny, which is, of course, the fact. Mrs. Van Cleve, *née* Sweeny, does not appear to sympathize with her husband's point of view, but Bromfield is fully determined to render you thus your due portion of the estate."

Julia sighed. It was tiresome having this old affair brought up now.

"I am sure it's very sweet of Bromfield, but I really don't want him to do that," she said.

Mr. Sims looked at her and looked at her, and stroked his chin with his capable fingers, and wondered if Julia were as unworldly as she seemed, or whether this were just a dainty little overture.

"I told him you would feel just this way," he said, "and of course I appreciate your feelings on this painful matter."

"Oh, it's not painful," she explained; "it was just a boy and girl affair, between Bromfield and me."

He hadn't thought of it in that light. Julia had never appeared to him a mere frivolous girl.

"So? Hum-ha!" he said, not displeased by her treatment of this early love, which he had foreseen might be a problem later. "However, Bromfield seems to feel differently, and, so, apart from technicalities, I might say that this fortune, a considerable fortune, well over a million, of course only a fraction of Bromfield's whole inheritance, is already yours."

"I am sure there are ways to refuse it," said Julia.

"Oh, there are ways." Mr. Sims found the idea amusing. "I must also tell you that your Aunt Natalie very much resents Bromfield's wife coming into such a large share of her own father's estate, although he had well provided for her before. Your Aunt Natalie is not reticent in expressing her views, and even threatens proceedings. But if you accept this, I gather, she will drop the matter. You may thus help to avoid an unpleasant family lawsuit. They are very troublesome and costly, my dear Julia."

Somehow the problems of the family didn't impress Julia as much as they might have. And she was so full of the dream of her life with Ringling, which was to be poor, that the idea of having a million or

so was a mere nothing in comparison. But at the moment she was sensitive to Bromfield's illusion that he had broken her heart, and ruined her life and so on. Of course that was untrue, and she couldn't allow him to think so any longer.

"Oh, this money!" she said. "Bromfield is very silly, and you must tell him that I thank him, and I hope he is happy, but I really don't need it at all."

VIII

MR. SIMS decided that that one present of a thousand dollars had turned her head. Then the fancy came to him that she had guessed how he felt toward her, and that she actually expected to marry him, and that then she imagined she would have enough. Enough money! What a child she was. He smiled very tenderly, and paid a compliment or two to her delicacy of feeling.

"Well, well, you don't have to decide now," he comforted her, "we'll just leave the matter open for the present."

Then Julia decided, to prove to him that she was not a lone waif in the world, who might starve if she didn't take this money, that she would tell him that she was engaged to Mr. Ringling. That will simplify everything, thought Julia.

"I am engaged, you see, to Mr. Ringling, and—"

It was Mr. Sims's turn to be surprised; to receive the thunderbolt. But it must be said for Mr. Sims that he admirably controlled his feelings; that he behaved with perfect self-possession. He merely looked concerned and anxious, and was very attentive while Julia told him how they would be poor at first, only reminding her that mutual poverty was not necessarily a bond.

"So you see," she ended, "that I am not actually in need of any help from the family. And if you are very kind, and tell Mr. Lee what a really superb lawyer Mr. Ringling is, why I am sure everything will be very delightful."

Yes, Mr. Sims would have a talk with Mr. Lee. And also one with Mr. Ringling. He must see Mr. Ringling before they landed. After all, as the family solicitor, wasn't he, in a way, her guardian? Anyhow, he must congratulate the young man.

Meanwhile he must think things over. This was very much of a surprise to him. He had had no idea that Julia had any intentions of marrying so soon, if ever.

"You know how close to my heart your interests are," he vowed again.

Julia said she knew that, all at once impatient to be gone, for the interview had lasted much longer than she had expected, and she had a very important engagement. He went out with her on the promenade deck, helping her gallantly, for the sea had risen during the day. Mrs. Bush, he told her, had been almost catapulted overboard while passing Mrs. Weisenberger with hauteur, that afternoon.

They were just making their way with caution to the lower deck when they met Mr. Ringling coming up, and wondering what had happened to her.

Mr. Sims greeted him cordially, very cordially; grasped him by the hand and congratulated him at once.

"And now, my dear Julia, won't you let me talk to this young man—just a word or two."

He would want some facts to present to Mr. Lee, Julia realized. She was quite willing. She had never felt so friendly toward Mr. Sims. But as time went on, and Ringling did not appear, she began to grow impatient. The facts seemed to require an unduly long time.

Then it occurred to her that perhaps Ringling had thought she would meet him on their chosen place on the boat deck. It wasn't clear why he should think that. But it was possible, and the picture of him waiting for her there on the top deck in this stormy weather worried her until the third-class salon became unsupportable.

The familiar boat deck seemed strange to-night, as she was alone, and dangerous, too, in this tumultuous sea, a place so easy to miss one's footing, with only the scant bars to hold one from a headlong slip into the greedy sea.

She leaned her head against the keel of the lifeboat in that corner where they had so often been, and a loneliness swept over her—a desolation, and a sense of foreboding for which she could not account.

IX

THERE were voices suddenly. People were coming down the heaving deck toward her. She drew back behind the lifeboat. Then she almost ran forward, as she recognized Ringling's voice, but she checked herself, for his companion was Mr. Sims.

"This dog, you may be interested to know," said Mr. Sims, "was a present from

Julia's great-uncle, as a mark of his personal esteem."

Even in this gale, even with the constant need of guarding his footing on this reeling deck, Mr. Sims was as suave and bland as ever.

Julia expected them to pass on, but when they reached the lifeboat behind which she stood Ringling suddenly stopped. He was just beside her, so near that she could have rested her head upon his shoulder, and she saw his hand pass tenderly over the rough boards of the lifeboat.

"You seem to be willing to do a good deal for me, Mr. Sims," he said.

"When I see a young man with your ability I am glad to give him a lift," answered Mr. Sims, stopping also and moving into the shelter of the lifeboat. "I am glad that I am in a position to do so. With a little backing at the start, a little interested influence, you should accomplish great things."

"Only, you don't like the idea of this marriage?"

"My dear young man"—Mr. Sims's voice was never so honeyed—"from your own point of view, marriage with a penniless, inexperienced girl, dear as our Julia is! What a mistake! You need a rich wife, my boy."

"And if we do marry—"

Mr. Sims's voice sharpened a bit.

"I thought we had already disposed of that contingency."

"You misunderstood me, if you did, Mr. Sims."

Mr. Sims sighed wearily.

"I wonder if you are as able as I had thought—as clear-sighted. Well, well, as you young people say, it's the world well lost! Hardly a frame of mind for a successful lawyer."

"You might even use this influence of yours against us?"

Mr. Sims was offended and injured.

"I shall do what is best for dear Julia."

"Which is to do everything you can to stop our marriage?"

Mr. Sims laughed, and doubtless the strain of urbanity in such tumultuous exposure was beginning to tell upon his nerves, for it was distinctly an unpleasant laugh, a frankly ruthless laugh.

"Exactly that, young man."

"Thank you, Mr. Sims, but it's Julia I take."

The ship rose on a great wave, and Mr.

Sims had to steady himself against the lifeboat also, so that it was as if he had bent to whisper into Ringling's ear.

"Noble young man," he said. "Love conquers all! A fine bridegroom you'll make without a job, without a future, to offer a penniless bride."

"That's up to us, Mr. Sims."

"You think so. You think you two can get rid of Mr. Sims like that!" He laughed again.

Then the ship arose on another greater wave, tipped high on its crest, and sank into the trough. It was impossible to be bland or suave on that deck; it was easy to be the very opposite.

Ringling reached back, and caught hold of the rail with one hand, moving back from Mr. Sims, and Julia thought it a wonder that he had not yet seen her, nor that Mr. Sims had not, for he too came a step closer about the bow of the lifeboat.

"Ringling," went on Mr. Sims, and each word was so incisive Julia heard it above the wind like a shout, "you had better be sensible. You had better drop all hope of this marriage."

Ringling forgot his hold on the rail, forgot the demanding sea below.

"Try and make me!" he cried.

X

It was not a sea that could be very well ignored. As he spoke, the ship arose once more. It surged high, and then it tipped. At that moment everything and every one was in the power of the sea.

It was a sea that had no respect for the most estimable of persons, for the loftiest and the most revered, even for such a successful lawyer as Mr. Sims. It cast him jauntily forward like the commonest ruffian, like a mere bauble it flung him upon the young man in front of him.

It was an unexpected pleasantry of the sea's for which Ringling was not prepared, and he staggered under it, fell back from it, and suddenly his head and shoulders were bent far out over the jubilant waters. The expedient Mr. Sims was granted an opportunity even he had not foreseen to be rid of a troublesome young man.

Then he was aware that some one else had thrown herself on Ringling, was holding him fast with desperate strength. Never had a third person been such a crowd as was Julia at that moment to Mr. Sims.

Opportunity is known never to knock

twice, and the ship was righting itself all at once, and then Ringling was on his feet, and it was Mr. Sims who was reeling not prettily across the deck.

Julia felt Ringling's arms about her, lifting her to her feet, clasping her fast, but she saw that his eyes were fixed on Mr. Sims, watching that gentleman regain his balance, and steady himself against the cabin, and then twist his face into a parody of his old smile.

"A most unfortunate slip," he said.

Ringling nodded slowly.

"Most unfortunate," he agreed. "Sorry, Mr. Sims, you missed that trick, but I guess I'll stay on board to-night."

Mr. Sims was quickly regaining his salon manner.

"You can hardly prove your allegation," he said, and then he bowed to Julia, "even with such a prejudiced witness."

He bowed again. Even on that rolling ship he achieved a gallant, sweeping bow, and then he turned and groped his way to the safer, more civilized, much more suave and bland regions of the promenade deck.

XI

A GOLDEN morning, a blue level sea, dotted with boats with gala red sails, and the long shore line of France, and the stone wharves of Cherbourg, the Old World at last. "The new world for us," said Julia.

She stood by Ringling, watching the tender that was carrying the first-class ashore shove away from the liner. Both of them saw one figure among all these travelers, grouped about their luggage, a figure not turned their way, but with eyes fixed on the distant shore. Up to him there bustled a lady resplendent in violet, and, as she handed him a letter, she turned and waved, and Julia waved back as though in answer to a signal, and then rested back against her escort.

"What did Mrs. Bush give our friend Sims?" asked Ringling.

"It's from a former client of his, darling, telling him she has another lawyer."

He smiled down at her.

"Will she have so much need of a lawyer to look after her affairs?"

"Of a first-class one, I think."

Then with a boldness any tourist-class passenger knows is never found in a young lady who has been well brought up, she slipped her arm about him.

"I shall have a wedding present for you,

dearest, which you must promise me now you won't refuse."

"A surprise?"

Julia nodded.

"Something I have heard," she said, "that will help you to accomplish great things."

He laughed.

"Tell me now," he begged.

She shook her head, for she wasn't going to tell him now that she had written Mr. Sims he had given her sufficient reason to accept the general's bequest. And Ringling couldn't urge her, then, for a command rang out:

"Third-class this way."

The Publicity Girl

THIS YOUNG PHYSICIAN DISCOVERS IN HIMSELF THE SYMPTOMS THAT HE OVERLOOKED IN A FAIR PATIENT

By Elizabeth Irons Folsom

ALLEN WELD COSGROVE, M.D., his back to the light, looked gravely across at his patient, who was sitting with the glare from the window in her face, as is the usual thing in a physician's office. She was squinting painfully.

"It is just this beastly cold," she said hoarsely. "It does not get better."

Cosgrove, M.D., put his firm, well-taken-care-of fingers on the pulse near him. It leaped under his touch. Aside from the leap, it was thready and too fast.

He removed his fingers and looked steadily at her. It was his custom to look steadily at patients. The dignity in the custom added to his actual age—and lack of age was the one disturbing element in his serious career.

Of course time would take care of that, but he assisted time with all at his disposal. He frowned very slightly. That also was dignified.

This girl had been twice to his office. She had appeared rather interesting, but her use of the word "beastly" did not appeal to the young physician.

Let it be promptly stated, however, that Cosgrove, M.D., was not a snob; not an unsympathetic toplofty poseur as he had been called. He was just a man of background—an insistent background that would not down. The medical profession had been handed to him with tenets to recognize and histories to regard.

His father had been a Dr. Cosgrove; so had his grandfather. Pictures of both hung observingly on the walls of the office. Those were his forefathers.

His foremothers, if he might be forgiven the flippancy of the word, were also of the medical profession, and while his office was free from their likenesses, their influence sat on the bookshelves in the form of dog-eared volumes thumbled two generations back. Therefore, the profession of M.D. was not to be taken lightly. He had a background to remember and to live steadily by.

The girl coughed. "Beastly cold," she said again.

"This is bad weather for you to be out," he told her. The wind provingly shook the windows, caught glittering hard snow from the sills, and flung it against the panes.

"I will give you a prescription to have filled on your way home. Then you go to bed and stay there."

She laughed croakingly.

"I wish I could. There's nothing I'd like better, but I have two talks to make this afternoon."

"Talks?" Dr. Cosgrove did not know much about the girl. At her previous visits it had not been necessary to ask many questions. She did not look as if she might be a permanent patient.

"Yes. I am a publicity speaker and writer."

"Publicity?"

That was a hideous word to associate with a girl. Even in an age when young women disport themselves freely, publicity as a profession was not chosen by the Cosgroves, their friends or clientele.

"I'm managing the Hart anniversary campaign now, and I make two speeches this afternoon to department heads." She coughed again. "That's why I came to you this morning. I thought you'd give me something that would let me speak so that I could be heard."

He looked steadily at her. Publicity. Two speeches to department heads. Hart's was the biggest chain of stores in the city. Fancy a girl speaking to department heads!

He looked at her with fresh interest. She had hooked her heels over the round of her chair—small shoes, thin brown silk stockings, with a garter buckle showing under the edge of her skirt.

He turned to his desk and wrote a prescription. For some unknown reason it was not necessary to get the card on which her medical history was recorded. He could write "Alice Lindsey" without verifying it on the index.

He remembered that she was twenty-one years old, and looked less. He knew exactly where she lived. Indeed, he told himself, he had acquired the practical things of the profession quickly and easily. That he could recall data about Alice Lindsey without looking them up, attracted his attention, and was a matter about which he could commend himself.

He handed her the slip of paper. She opened a small brown bag and put it in, unhooked her heels from her chair round, and stood up.

"I would like you to stay in as much as possible," he said formally.

"I can't stay in, but I'll take this—stuff." She smiled, and had not smiled before. It would not be necessary to add her smile to her professional record in the filing case. He would be able to recall the smile, too. That was because he was young—and he resented this frivolous thought. It took a long time to annex sufficient age to be insensible to unimportant things. Therefore, he was more grave when he said:

"You had better let me hear from you to-morrow."

"Shall I come up or telephone?"

He hesitated briefly while he thought. "Better come up," he said.

II

He looked at the door after she had closed it. Publicity? Then why in the dickens didn't she wear rubbers in such weather? It was not because she couldn't afford them. Publicity was probably well enough paid. It should be—for it seemed a tremendously hard, a nearly impossible thing to him.

Publicity—to department heads—likely she smiled when she talked—very flowing smiles that ran into her eyes and washed out a troubled pucker that he had noticed on the small section of forehead that her hat allowed him to see. Barring the sniffling effect of her beastly cold, barring swollen lips and eyes moist and red, she must be a pretty girl.

He shoved back his expensive swivel chair, touched the shining button that indicated to his office girl that he was at liberty, set the silver-framed picture of his mother a little more to the right, and arose to receive the next patient.

"Oh—er—Mr. Marsh," he said vaguely, and pulled out the drawer of the mahogany filing case. "Andrew Marsh—aged fifty—"

When he had attended to the needs of Andrew Marsh—who does not appear further in this story—it was time to go home for luncheon. He locked his private office carefully and went through the reception room. He enjoyed his office; he liked the heavy, deeply upholstered furniture.

"Mulberry," Rosalie had said the color was, and she had helped his mother to select it. The hangings at the windows were mulberry—whatever that was—too. Sheer, lacy something shielded the glass.

The massive table had even rows of magazines, all under two months old. There was not a speck of dust to be seen; the radiator sizzled softly and comfortably. It was all very good. He was started just right.

But he would like the office better when it was a bit less new—like himself. He had been there a year, and a year does not, apparently, do much to high-grade furniture—nor much, either, to a young physician eager to get on. He would give a great deal to have a few gray hairs—at the temples especially.

He jerked himself up from self-contemplation in the broad mirror between the

windows. If he wanted to contemplate anything, it should be his books, for they showed a remarkably good year for the first at the job. He was getting on, really getting on, and not hurt because he didn't have to starve to do it.

That he had a background of bank balance as well as history, didn't harm him; that he could wear good clothes, drive his own car, take expensive relaxation when he chose, had not diverted him from the main thing that he was there for. He was sure of that.

Lucky? Oh, yes—and would be luckier.

Outside, he climbed into his coupé, and shut the door quickly against the snow driving again as it had done all morning.

No rubbers in this storm! Alice Lindsey was to make publicity talks. He hadn't looked into her throat. Somehow he hadn't remembered to do it. Well—she'd be in next day.

He let himself in the front door of the stately old house. In the soft dim light he hung up his overcoat and hat on the rack where his grandfather had hung his. The broad, shining stairs arose in lordly fashion; he had always loved the gleam of the marble statue at the turn.

And through the wide open doors of the drawing-room, he saw the flicker of firelight in the luxurious little back room where the noise of the city was not, and where all light and sound were blended into the delicacy and perfectness that his mother loved.

"Back there, mother?" he called.

She answered, and he went to her. She dropped her lorgnette into her lap.

"Rosalie is coming to luncheon," she said.

"That's good." He sat down in the other chair close to the fire and stretched before it.

"Tired, Allen?"

"Why, yes. I seem to be—somehow."

"Not overworking, son?" she asked anxiously.

Dr. Cosgrove laughed. "I have seen two patients to-day. That doesn't seem very exacting, does it? But it was rather strenuous at the hospital this morning. I need to learn, mother, not to take my patients too hard when they are very sick."

"Oh, you mustn't take anything too hard! It isn't necessary. Your father did, but he had to—almost. But you, my dear boy, I'm back of you with all I have and all my love."

"I appreciate it."

She hesitated.

"I've been wondering, Allen, how you and Rosalie feel about marrying rather soon."

"Why—we don't feel any way about it," he answered surprisedly. "We haven't said anything about it. I've never said a word to Rosalie about marrying."

"But it is understood, of course."

He pondered.

"Yes, I suppose it's understood—really. But we've neither of us spoken of it. There's no hurry. I want to be established before I marry."

His mother smiled tolerantly.

"You are established, my son."

"Well, there's no hurry."

"A young physician, Allen, has many temptations."

"Temptations!"

"Yes. It's so—er—rather an intimate thing, being a doctor. And you are very good-looking, Allen—it is notorious that a good-looking young doctor has much love made to him. There's so much opportunity for it, such chances for that kind of thing."

"I hope you don't think I'm an idiot, mother."

"I think you are just a man, my son. But that is neither here nor there; you've known for years that some day you and Rosalie would marry. There has never been any one you preferred."

It was a question, and he answered it.

"No, there hasn't. But I don't know how she feels."

"You know well enough how she feels. I think it would be an awfully good thing to have it over and you settled in your own establishment. I want you, Allen, not to be a struggling physician, but a big one, and a big physician must have what shows prosperity to the world."

He stirred uneasily.

"Oh, pshaw! I'm doing all right, mother. Don't worry me. Don't shove!"

She stared at him before she spoke again.

"You have everything to put you at the top. My money, of course, and when you marry Rosalie you'll have hers."

He moved again, and she went hastily ahead:

"I don't mean that you marry her for her money or position, but it doesn't do any harm to have money and position with the girl that you like best. Does it?"

"No."

"You should marry and have your own home, that must be just right. Have it dignified in every way."

"Mulberry?" He laughed.

"I don't understand what you mean. With your background of suitable ancestry and money, and adding to both in your marriage—there is nothing you can't have in fame and fortune. I'd like you to make it sure while I'm alive to see it."

"Oh, mother! You alive! You're a mere child!"

"That's all right. I'd like to see it settled. Everything of the best, Allen. You are driving a shabby car this minute. You should have a new, expensive one."

"Oh, my car's all right."

"Do you mean you don't want the best?"

"I want it, of course, but I don't care about my accessories being greater than I am. I don't want to be afraid of my own belongings."

His mother laughed.

"You'll be a great physician anyhow, but I'd like it helped in every way. Do you know how well your patients like you? I don't believe you know. Mrs. Hall was here this morning. She said you—and she knows, for she's had a hundred doctors—she says you have a wonderful bedside manner."

He had heard about his "bedside manner" before. That was an important thing in a physician.

"She said you had such sympathy in your voice. Almost a coo, she said. That's very nice, Allen; it will get you far with women patients."

That word "coo" did not appeal to Dr. Cosgrove. If he really did coo, then he must be careful not to use the tone in the wrong place. Women patients? Well, maybe. But he supposed there were women patients who had a sense of humor.

He wished his mother had not used the word. Mrs. Hall was an old fool, anyhow. He was very nearly saying so, when Rosalie came in.

There were never any clothes better than Rosalie wore. They swathed when she wanted them to, they fluttered at her wish, they were trim or saucy, clinging and evasive, or daring and dazzling. She loosened her fur coat as she came in, and the doctor took it from her shoulders.

She stooped to Mrs. Cosgrove.

"How comfortable, how gracious, how

just right you are," she said. "And it is so bad outside."

"You are not wearing rubbers, either," said Dr. Cosgrove.

"Either?" and Rosalie's brows went up. "Why the 'either'?"

"Yes, why the 'either,' Allen?"

"I don't know why," and he laughed. "Unless it is that I had a patient this morning without overshoes."

"Now, that is exactly what I like to know about," said Rosalie, settling herself comfortably. "I like to know about patients when they are fresh in your mind, and this one seems fresh there. A girl, of course?"

"Yes, a girl." He discovered that he liked to speak of her. "How you girls do slop around in the wet, unprotected."

"But I came in the motor. Did she—the patient?"

Allen laughed.

"No, I fancy not."

"Woiking goil?" asked Miss Rosalie Storm.

"She does publicity."

"Does what? What did you say she does, Allen?"

"I said 'publicity.'"

"Publicity! How dreadful! Just what is it, son?"

"I didn't ask her. She came to me because she was sick, not because she was publicity."

"He is touchy about it," suggested Rosalie. "Pretty girl, Allen?"

"No one is exactly pretty with a—er—beastly cold in her head." He was sharp in his answer.

"You can drive Rosalie home on your way to your office," said his mother after luncheon.

Was it said meaningly?

"Yes, of course," he answered, and did drive her home.

III

THE weather next morning had apparently decided to outdo itself. All night Dr. Cosgrove had heard the street cleaning apparatus chugging through. The snow was coming down thickly.

That was probably the reason why Alice Lindsey did not come to the office at eleven, nor at twelve, nor at one o'clock, when his luncheonless office hours were over.

If she had come that day, as she had said she would, or if she had come the

following day, he would not have had that unexpected hot flash all over him when the office girl announced Miss Lindsey. She came in swiftly, breathing hard, and clung to the door knob.

"How is the cold?" he asked perfunctorily, as he placed a chair.

"It's worse, thank you," she said huskily. "That is why I came up, because it is worse. I had great faith in your prescription, but—"

"Your faith was misplaced?" Was he trying to be smart or pert? Or something that the observing ancestors on the wall were not, in office hours?

She smiled, taking down a dampish handkerchief to do it. What a flowing smile hers was! It slid from her lips to her eyes—far apart eyes, very brown, and crinkling at the corners.

Her pulse leaped again as he touched it, and he kept his fingers there, looking seriously and steadily at her, but analyzing himself, for his own psychology was important as well as that of his patients'. He had gone twice to hear old Folkstone's lecture on that subject.

Her wrist was quivering in his clasp.

"But it isn't the cold that frightens me," she was saying hoarsely. "I'm so nervous—so—sort of shot to pieces—" Rosalie would not have said that. "I—I was frightened coming up—in the subway—there were—" She stopped, twisted her hand from his clasp, and it went with the other to her chin to hold it steady.

"Tell me."

"There were two women opposite me—fat ones—and as I looked at them and thought how awful to be so fat, they changed into four women! I batted my eyes and looked away—and when I looked back they were two. And all in a minute they were four again—and they stayed four all the way up. It frightened—"

Tears were squeezing themselves from eyes that tried to hold them back.

"Then—then—when I was on the street and coming here, the sidewalk was so steep—on such a slant that I could hardly climb it—and I knew—and you know, Dr. Cosgrove, that it is not on a slant at all—it's quite flat, and I knew it—so it frightened me, too."

"Yes, it would," he said calmly. "But it must not. It's just nerves. You have been working hard. Have you been worrying about anything?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Have you been sufficiently nourished?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Don't try to repress. Let yourself go. Cry if you want to."

"I do want to." She put her head on the corner of his shining desk, and sobbed without restraint.

He watched her. If he had been an old man—old age gives such rights—he would have touched her shoulder, perhaps patted it. But being futilely young, he could only sit woodenly and watch her cry.

Such a back of a neck! As she bent her head, tiny tendrils of brown hair were below her little hat. He did not believe her hair was bobbed; they did not look like chopped tendrils.

And there are so few good ears in the world. Hers were delicate. He had already made himself acquainted with her hands and wrists and pointed chin, but the back of her neck and her ears brought fresh and not qualified interest.

"Now," he said gently, "I want to bring in Miss Church from the outer office to help me, and see if your throat and lungs are all right, and how far down this cold really does go. Do you mind?" Then he straightened himself suddenly, remembering how his mother had used the word, "coo," and hearing something like it in his words.

The cold showed itself as going far down. He charged her to keep in out of the snow, and to let him hear from her the next day.

IV

He went home that night, slightly mixed in his mind. He could not help remembering the bare shoulders and soft back, from which Miss Church had slipped a little white garment that a blue ribbon controlled. He sat dizzily in the other chair before his mother's fire.

"Did you speak to Rosalie, son?" she asked him.

"Heavens! No, mother, I did not. Do let me alone on that subject."

"Is there any one else, Allen," she asked after a long pause.

He did not answer; he had told her once, hadn't he, that there was not. Why should the subject come up again?

"You are not attracted by that girl you spoke of the other day? That publicity girl."

"Good God, mother! Where did you get that idea!"

"You didn't seem quite natural about her," she replied slowly. "And you don't seem natural now."

So it was his mother who put the idea into his head!

He hadn't had it before. Certainly not.

V

IN his private office the next morning, he went directly to his desk and looked at the shining corner where her tears had fallen.

This was a pretty state of things! A pretty mess! A pretty musing up of steadily progressing fortune!

If he had his way about it—he was dead-ly honest with himself very often—if he had his way, he would shunt Rosalie and all she represented off the map. Not that Rosalie would care. She wouldn't. She was not the caring kind.

He wasn't ass enough to believe that he was much to her except a good prospect. She was that to him, and two good prospects combined would make a sane future. The ancestors on the wall did not speak. But they looked at him.

Miss Alice Lindsey did not come in at the opening of office hours, nor had she come in when they ended. He had walked to the east window and looked vaguely out, had walked to the south window and looked vaguely out. He had done those things several times, when the telephone rang.

A friendly feminine voice told him that Miss Lindsey was ill that morning and, the speaker thought, it would be wise for him to come to see her.

"I'm Mrs. Stringer, a friend who lives at her residence," the voice told him.

He was altogether calm and professional as he drove his car down town. He made no more haste than for any other appointment. He drove the car over the curb while turning the last corner, but no doubt that was because the snow was not properly removed.

He had not known very well the neighborhood of her "residence." It was a neat, red brick house on the sunny side of a moderately quiet street.

A plump, smiling woman answered his ring, and an excited Pekinese hurled himself about his ankles.

"Here, here, Prince!" cried the woman. "Get away, get away!"

Prince backed off, barking furiously.

"You don't mind him, I'm sure, doctor," said the woman.

As the combined weight of Prince and his collar could not have been more than three pounds, Dr. Cosgrove expressed his indifference.

"I'm Mrs. Stringer, her friend. I'll take you right up. The child's pretty sick. Her face is very red."

Her face *was* red. Dr. Cosgrove sat down beside her, and Mrs. Stringer dashed out to answer another ring at the bell. Prince could be heard galloping after her down the stairs.

While he waited for Miss Alice Lindsey's temperature to register itself in the glass tube, Dr. Cosgrove looked away from her. It was just as well.

It was a pretty room. He had supposed that self-supporting girls in big cities lived in attics, with milk bottles on the window sills. Miss Lindsey lived comfortably. She herself was in a bed quite as much mahogany as his own at home, with a yellow silk cover across her.

There were silk curtains edging the wide windows, and several shelves of books tightly crammed. There were lamp shades, and a tea table with yellow cups and saucers, a shining electric grill, an easy-chair with pillows, a good picture or two. The rug was soft and deep.

Miss Lindsey's temperature was not satisfactory. When Mrs. Stringer came panting back, he told her that there must be a nurse in charge.

"I was a nurse before I married my husband," she said. "And I can assume charge of this case, if it's necessary."

Miss Lindsey was not interested in the discussion. Her fingers were laced together on the yellow silk. Her lids nearly covered her eyes, and within the eyes there was none of the glow or the speculation or the—well, the thing that Dr. Cosgrove had thought might be interest.

Interest in him? Yes—he would think truthfully—he had fancied that Alice Lindsey might have liked to attract him. Blooming, conceited cad he might be—but he had thought that!

VI

SHE barely noticed him that day, or the week following. Her eyelids quivered when he spoke, and that was about all. He never really knew how many days he came.

He was not at all sure that the girl would get well. And he would have stayed beside any other patient as sick as she. Being young—for the first time he did not hate the idea—he was not flooded with calls, and could sometimes sit beside the bed while Mrs. Stringer went out for what she called her "relax."

Often he sat in the girl's room during Mrs. Stringer's absence. Sometimes Alice Lindsey looked at him, sometimes she lay with closed eyes.

It was very still there. Prince, raised on hind legs, scratched at the doctor's trousers and was taken up, there to sigh deeply and sleep.

More than a few times Dr. Cosgrove heated something over the little shining grill, and at those times he wondered what his mother and Rosalie would think, could they see him, for he had been proud of being a man who did not fuss about with things.

But when the girl began to get better, Dr. Cosgrove knew that all this must stop. There was a great deal to stop. There was the soothing silence of the room, there was a queer unrestful peace, there was Prince's warm sighing body across his knees, there was Mrs. Stringer's returning footstep which called for departure.

And there was the girl so like—so like—what was she like, lying there with closed eyes? A flower! When he decided that she was a flower, he put Prince down wrong end up, and walked noiselessly about the room. Flower! Fool!

Fools said such things, fools that were prepared to wreck futures, create panics in satisfied families, do the unexpected and the very heartily undesired.

It was a plain enough situation. He was in love, and certainly he was egging it on; liking it—wanting it—Lord, yes—wanting the incredible and the impossible. He knew her so little. He had hardly heard her voice; just those few times in their early acquaintance, hardly at all during the illness. But what of that? The scourging, searing emotion was battering there! It had him—fast.

The illness dropped away as quickly as it had come. Alice Lindsey sat up in bed, talked to him, laughed some. There was no further speculation about what her voice was like, for it told him much.

He knew why she had come to the city, he knew her difficulty in getting started, he

knew about the little house up-State which had to go when her mother died, and how, sometimes, it had been all a pretty lonely business. While Mrs. Stringer relaxed, he learned much.

But there was only one ending to all this, and he suddenly produced the ending one day when he said to her:

"Have Mrs. Stringer call me up to-morrow to tell me how you are. It will not be necessary for me to come."

"You are not coming down?"

"It is not necessary, now that you are so much better. I can't keep coming all the rest of my life, you know, no matter—no matter how much I like to."

He had said it—the first thing that he should not have said! Therefore, speedily there would be a second speech. Once started, forbidden words came crowding to his lips. He got up hurriedly and looked away from the wide-opened eyes. How brown they were.

"I—er—I'll go on now. She—she can phone me. Good-by. You—er—drop into the office some day when you're in the neighborhood. You—er—have made a good recovery, and don't need me any more."

She did not answer, and he went out, saying to himself that the one thing that allowed him to go was that she did not care—not his way of caring, anyhow.

He went down the red-carpeted stairs which were so familiar. The house was profoundly still. Prince, trailing him, was, for once, silent.

In the lower hall he fumbled for the knob of the door. He found it and set the door wide.

Prince's eyes were round and inquiring; one foot was held questioningly aloft. Dr. Cosgrove addressed him half aloud:

"She doesn't care for me. But I think I'll ask her plainly, as man to man. She will say she does not, and then it will all be easier."

VII

He closed the door carefully and went back up the stairs.

She had raised the window and stood in front of it. A bitter wind was sweeping across her bare throat.

At the sound of the opening door, she turned.

"What do you mean by this?" he cried, catching her arm with one hand and pulling

down the window with the other. "Are you crazy? What do you mean by this?"

He spoke violently, caught a robe from a chair back, and wrapped it fiercely about her. "What do you mean?"

She flung out both arms and her head went back; in her slight throat a pulse was beating before his eyes.

"I don't want to get well!" she said. "I want—I want—pneumonia—or something. I want to be sick! Oh, my heart is broken! It's broken!"

Soft shoes were on the floor, and he picked them up, pushed her into the big chair, and put the shoes on her feet.

She wanted to be sick, wanted pneumonia—why? What for? He had seen girls who did not want to live—once, such a pretty girl; he could not help her, and she died before him after she had told him why.

Did not want to live? Why not? Oh, the pity of girls alone! The pity of girls who needed care and who were alone, beating back and forth in the cruelty of the big city! Publicity! Such a girl. No wonder.

But—what broke hearts? What broke girls' hearts? Not jobs, nor lack of jobs, nor wet, nor cold, nor worry. There was just one thing that broke hearts.

He was working furiously as his thoughts ran on. He had folded a blanket around

her, had put in the plug of the little grill, had put water on to boil, had opened his case for a stimulant. The water was bubbling—and what breaks hearts—

He carried the steaming cup to her.

"Drink this."

As she drank it, and choked and coughed, he stood at the window. Down in the street below people plodded through the new snow. They were people going home afoot to some one who cared. Or going home in cheap cars. What was life for? Was it to be adapted to men in picture frames, to security of fame and money and right accessories? What was life for, anyhow, when there was but one?

Then he went back and dropped on his knees beside her, put both arms about the blanket, and his face close to her flushed cheek.

"Little child, little child," he said stumbly, "why did you do this? Alice Lindsey, listen to me. Why did you do this? Tell me honestly, for it is quite important."

"Because you would not come again if I was well! I wanted you to come again, to come more. I couldn't bear it to be well—and not see you."

"This doesn't happen," said he. "It can't happen. But it has. And the whole world but you may go hang!"

WOODLAND WAYS

On golden sun-bright Summer days
How welcome are the woodland ways,
Where Spring still lingers 'neath the trees
And birds sing sylvan symphonies.

A carpet soft of moss and pine
Where squaw and checker berries shine,
And every way your feet may turn
The scent of cedar and of fern.

On dewy moon-drenched Summer nights
How luring are the woods delights,
Cool shadows holding out soft hands
To tempt you to enchanted lands,

The green of leafage and the gray
Of boughs that gently swing and sway,
One star that in the zenith beams,
A distant bell, and peace and dreams.

L. Mitchell Thornton

Framed

THE POLITICAL BOSS PUTS OVER A DOUBLE CROSS AFTER
THE MANNER OF HIS KIND

By Claude S. Watts

MICKEY DONNELLY, wrestling with his razor, paused to listen. From the bedroom came sounds of strife—squeals, yelps, excited words in shrill, high-pitched voices—that told of the matutinal activities of Mickey, Jr., and Irene. But the thing he noted was that Mame was not singing as she bustled to and fro between the dining room and the kitchen, and Mame was the kind of a wife who always sang at her housework, especially in the morning.

He knew what was the matter. Mame, too, had been listening, and she had heard sounds from the bathroom—sounds that he had tried vainly to suppress, almost choking in the effort. Mame was worried. Well, so was he. He had the same thing to worry about that she had, and on top of that he was worried because she was worried. He was discovering that worry is cumulative.

Mame's expression was distraught and troubled, and hers was a forced smile when she greeted the little family at the breakfast table. Mickey's smile was equally forced, but he flattered himself it was less obviously so.

"Muffins!" screeched Irene ecstatically.

"Good-y! Good-y!" sing-songed the younger Mickey, banging the table with his knife—"Gimme some! Gimme some!"

Mickey looked at the plate heaped high with the golden-brown creations, piping hot from the oven, and at the platter with generously thick slices of ham and eggs done to a turn, and caught the fragrance from the steaming coffeepot.

"Some breakfast, Mame!" he complimented her. "What you don't know about cooking ain't in the books."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," answered Mame, "but I'll know by the way you eat whether you really like the breakfast."

"Huh! Watch me! I got an appetite like a bear."

And Mickey pitched in as if he were fairly ravenous, chattering volubly the while at her and at the children. But Mame noted that he talked overmuch, and that his activity consisted largely of rattling his knife and fork, cutting and recutting the food upon his plate, and seeing that the youngsters were lavishly supplied, while he ate scarcely anything. She noted, also, the huskiness in his voice, and the monotonous, persistent cough that he tried so hard to suppress, and her heart sank.

"You've got an appetite like a bear, all right," she said, making a brave effort to smile and joke, "only you mean Irene's teddy bear."

"Aw! You don't know what you're talking about! Here"—extending his cup—"gimme some more of the Java; it's fine. You're the touchiest cook I ever heard of," he continued. "If a fella don't gobble down everything you put on the table, including his napkin ring, you get sore!"

A fit of violent coughing seized him, and try as he might, he could not choke it down.

"Geeminy!" he exclaimed when, still gasping for breath, he found his voice again. "I put so much pepper on my eggs I like to strangled myself!"

Not a mouthful of the eggs on his plate had he touched, and Mame could not keep the tears from her eyes.

"Run along," she said to the children, who were clamoring to leave the table, and then: "Mickey, *won't* you see the doctor to-day? Please!"

"Now, Mame," he began impatiently, but she interrupted.

"Don't get cross, Mickey. I just can't help it. That cough of yours is scaring me to death!"

"It's nothing—just the cold that's hung on since last winter."

"You know better than that, Mickey. A cold wouldn't make you cough like that all the time, and at night, and—" He was silent, fingering nervously at his cup, while he avoided meeting her misty, troubled eyes. "And—and last night, Mickey, after you had one of them spells, you was just wringing wet with sweat."

"I remember," he said. "I had a nightmare. I dreamed the Democrats had cleaned us up, and that 'd make anybody sweat!" He laughed, and pushed back his chair as if to rise. "Cheer up, old girl! I'm all right, and you're not going to talk me into wasting perfectly good money on a doctor. When I get some coin that I don't know what to do with, and want to throw it at the birds, I'll go down and see Old Doc King—he's an owl!"

Mame knew that it was not the doctor's fee that deterred him; it was the fear of the doctor's diagnosis. How could he be so stubborn? "But, Mickey," she urged. "I should think you'd be worried to death yourself. Just look how you're losing weight."

"Shucks! I'm getting in good trim for the campaign!" He would not permit himself to think of how broad of shoulder and thick of chest he had been, nor would he admit that his collar was now at least a full size too large. "If you don't believe I'm in good condition, look at the color I got—ain't it fine?"

"Mickey!" she gasped. He was actually boasting of the sinister red spots that burned in his cheeks! "That color's just about as good a sign as the red is on the cheeks of the girls you see down on Fourth Street! It's a danger sign, that's what."

Again he was coughing, but again he strove valiantly to keep up his game of pretense. "Don't make me laugh so!" he protested. "You're always picking on them Fourth Street chickens. You'd oughta go easy on 'em—maybe they're doing the best they can." He paused, and the make-believe laughter died out of his eyes, leaving them feverish and strained. "Anyhow, I'm doing the best I can—the best I can for you, Mame, and for the kids!"

II

"OLD DOC" KING was the first man Mickey ran into down at headquarters that

morning, where he went after a brief half hour in the office at the city hall. Mickey, it should be explained, belonged to the small army of municipal employees who are paid by the city, but do most of their work for the party organization, and with election day almost at hand, he was putting in practically all his time at the committee rooms, or in outside work pertaining to politics.

It was an unusually bitter city campaign, the Democrats and Independents having united on a fusion ticket in their quadrennial effort to oust "the gang" on a reform movement. Mickey, needless to say, belonged to the gang. The sixty and thirty-day polls—those records which a political machine compiles of the party affiliation and voting inclination of every citizen—had looked bad, and the ten-day poll, then in process of compilation, was none too encouraging. The prospect of defeat was, indeed, a nightmare to him, and to many others as well.

"Hello, doc!" Mickey grinned with his greeting, and then, as the cough clutched him, he added: "Excuse it, if I seem to be barking at you."

The physician eyed him sharply. "I don't like that cough of yours, and I've noticed it before," he said, with professional concern. "Better drop around to the office and let me give you the once over, Mickey."

"Nothing didding! You rate ace high with me personally, doc, but I've no money to be spending with the likes o' you."

King scowled. "I suppose you're saving it for the undertaker."

"Quit y'r kiddin'!" Mickey's retort was snappy enough, but something inside of him seemed to drag as he hurried away. As he opened the door of the general lounging room, he bumped into one of his fellow workers, who drew him outside for a few words. Those words said, the man was about to pass on when he hesitated.

"You're not looking your best, Mickey," he said. "What's the matter—off your oats?"

"Not on your life!" Mickey growled.

Inside the room, Tom Duffy collared him. "Just the man I want to see!" Tom was more than a fellow worker; he was Mickey's best friend, his buddy.

"Mickey," he continued, with every evidence of excitement, "what do y' think? Williams has resigned."

Mickey's heart gave a leap. Williams

had held the captaincy of Mickey's ward, the post on which Mickey, as a precinct committeeman, had long set his eyes and his hopes. His mind started racing, and he scarcely heard Tom as the latter explained.

"Resigned, by request. He's fallen down until the Old Man wouldn't stand for him any longer. You're it, Mickey!"

"Don't josh me, Tom!"

"There's no josh about it. You've earned it, and the boys are all for you. All you have to do is to see the Old Man, and then we'll have a meeting and put you over."

They were standing with their heads close together, and did not notice a new arrival until a heavy hand was laid on Mickey's shoulder, and a familiar voice spoke: "I want to see you."

It was the Old Man—John Hearne, the head of the party machine. Startled, Mickey began coughing, but managed to articulate, "Now, Mr. Hearne?"

"Come in, in ten minutes," said the boss, and passed on into the inner sanctum.

"Mickey—he wants to see you—it's a pipe!" Tom's enthusiasm scarcely knew bounds, but Mickey was coughing so violently that he forgot about the captaincy for the moment, and Tom was quick to observe that. "What's the matter with you? That cough's fierce!"

"It's nothing," said Mickey. "It's—it's the smoke in here."

But the cough persisted, and so did Tom. "Smoke, hell! That ain't what's the matter. Besides, you're lookin' half sick anyhow."

"Say"—Mickey stiffened suddenly—"you're the third guy that's handed me that line o' talk already to-day. What y' think you're doing? Trying to make me sick? I'm going to bust somebody wide open if they don't—"

"Oh, y' are, are y'?" Tom thrust himself at Mickey. "How'd you like to begin on me? You're the Tabasco Kid, you are! I'll say it again, and say it slow: That cough o' yours is fierce, and when I hear it I see a long, black wagon, movin' slow, and I get a smell of flowers that don't make me think of a wedding. You don't look well, and y' ought to see a doctor. Now bust your best friend!"

"Forget it!" Mickey groused, and gave Tom a playful shove. "I'm all right; it's just a cold that's been hanging on since last winter. I'll get rid of it as soon as it's a

little warmer." He shivered as he spoke, although it was not cold. Tom's keen eyes did not miss that, but he quickly changed the subject.

"The Old Man 'll ask you how many of the precinct boys are for you," he said. "Tell him you got 'em all, and we'll get 'em all, or I'll do some bustin' myself. I'll wait for you while you have your talk, and then we'll get busy."

Mickey was whiter and more serious-looking than Tom had ever seen him when he came out after his interview with the boss, and Tom sprang to meet him with apprehension written large upon his face.

"What the—" he began.

"Oh, it's all right—it 'll be all right," Mickey reassured him. "But—"

"We'll make it all right!" Tom excitedly drew Mickey over by a window where they could talk without being overheard. "What's up?" he demanded. "You've got the votes. The Old Man ain't buttin' in, is he? That ain't his way; he's always for the man who can get the votes. He'd better not butt in!"

"That ain't it. He ain't interfering. He knows I can get the votes."

"Well, that's all there is to it, so what's eatin' y'?"

"No"—Mickey spoke slowly—"that ain't all there is to it. You see—well, it's like this: The Old Man knows I've worked hard, and he's for me, but—well, you know it's a hard job—lots o' work and responsibility, and all."

"What of it? He knows you've always been a horse for work."

"He knows I have been, but—"

"But what? Out with it!" Tom was all impatience.

"He wants to be sure I'll be able to deliver the goods in the future as I have in the past," Mickey blurted out. "You see, I got to coughing in there, and the Old Man said he'd noticed I wasn't looking so well, and he just put it up to me whether a man who was likely to get sick ought to take the job. He said he knew I had the best interests of the organization at heart, and of course I have, and—and we agreed not to fill the vacancy for awhile—maybe not till after the election. That's only ten days off, you know." Mickey paused and gulped once or twice, then went on: "Tom, I ain't a going to be sick! I just can't be sick! There's Mame and the kids, and—and I want to be ward captain!"

Tom was gulping some himself, but he vented his emotions in an explosive swear word. Then he thrust his arm through Mickey's.

"Let's get busy!" he said. "First off, we'll go see Old Doc King."

III

"PROMISE me, Tom—not a word o' this to Mame. It 'd kill her."

Poor, loyal Tom Duffy could only look unutterable misery at Mickey. The latter was even whiter of face than when he had emerged from John Hearne's office; but there was a fierce, fighting light in his eyes. "Remember, Tom—not a word to Mame!"

"But she'll have to know—you've got to go—you'll have to tell her."

"I'm not going."

"But doc says y' got to go!"

"I know what doc says, but I can't go. Why"—Mickey raised his voice irritably—"you know I can't go. You know I haven't got the money."

"I know; but if y' got to, y' got to, and that's all there is to it, and we'll fix it some way—we'll raise the coin somehow." Tom was groping and stumbling, but he blundered into an idea. "I know—the Old Man's got to put it up for you. He's done more than that for men that ain't done half the work you have. He's got to dig right down into his jeans for Mickey Donnelly!"

"I'll go on no man's charity," said Mickey quietly. "I'm not that kind. I'll work till I cave in, and if doc's right, I guess that won't be long. It's kinda tough—some jolt—but if it can't be helped, it can't be. And I hope it does come quick! I'd rather die right off than live a burden on anybody."

"Mickey, you're wrong—dead wrong," Tom protested. "I'm your friend, and—"

"You're my friend, Tom"—Mickey's voice grew husky—"but as my friend, you can do just two things for me—promise to help me keep it from Mame, and—and forget about that other."

Tom promised, and he would keep his promise, but he would not forget.

John Hearne has two offices for business. For politics he has twice as many.

There is his library at home, where he confers with State and national party leaders. Governors and United States Senators have been made in that room, and have gone there to pay their respects, and even a candidate for President, who had to have

John Hearne's good will and support, once went there, hat in hand.

There is his room at the Republican Club, where he always goes to receive election returns, and where he is wont to repair while local primaries and conventions are under way.

There is the big, barny café, where on at least three evenings a week he sits at the head of a long table, with his county chairman on his right, and his city chairman on his left, and receives precinct committeemen, ward captains, newspaper men, and plain, everyday citizens who are permitted to drop into and out of the charmed circle.

And then there is the "Hole in the Wall."

It is at the Hole in the Wall that he holds forth when he gets down to brass-tacks politics.

Passing through the general lounging room at headquarters, and on through the secretary's office, one finds himself in a narrow hall that runs some eighteen or twenty feet to the left, and he faces a wall that is perfectly blank, save for a slit of a door down near the other end of the hall. That door opens into a stall of a room, into which there is no other entrance, lighted by a single window at the end opposite the door.

A cheap roll top desk, with a telephone, a desk chair of ample proportions, and one little old pine kitchen chair, comprise the room's furnishings. There is only the one small chair, because never, by any chance, is there a third person present at a conference in the Hole in the Wall.

John Hearne is the sort of man who looks well with mahogany furniture. In fact, he would appear equally at home behind the mahogany desk of a bank president, or, arrayed in immaculate white apron and jacket, behind a mahogany bar—if such things may be remembered and mentioned—and, equally, in fact, he has graced both positions, less than two decades having marked his advance from one to the other.

Close-cropped grizzled hair and mustache, clear blue eyes, rugged features and ruddy complexion, big of barrel and a trifle overweight for five-feet-ten—that about itemizes him, so far as his personal appearance goes. Itemizing him otherwise is a different matter, for Hearne is a genius. It takes a genius to build up and hold together an organization that makes a man the most powerful individual factor in the

politics of a great city and State for a dozen years or more.

It was late before Tom Duffy succeeded in getting in to see the man of power. With the election at hand, Hearne was down to brass-tacks politics, and all day long there had been a steady stream of callers at the Hole in the Wall, and all day the telephone had been busy. Tom realized his temerity in bothering the boss with anything not pertaining directly to the problem of polling votes, but he plunged.

"I want to talk with you about Mickey Donnelly," he began.

"I haven't changed my mind since I talked to him." Hearne spoke gruffly and with finality.

"It ain't that, chief. I know about the ward captain business. This is different." Silence gave Tom permission to continue. "Mickey's all in—a lunger. He's had two hemorrhages and night sweats—it's the hasty bugs, y' know—and Doc King says the only chance for him is to beat it out to Arizona, and stay there at least a year."

"Well?" It was a mere grunt, as Tom hesitated.

"Well, Mickey ain't got enough money to take his wife and kids on a jitney picnic, to say nothin' o' takin' 'em out to Arizona and livin' there a year. He's never cheeped, and is just expectin' to go along and make a die of it; but knowin' how he's worked, early and late, for the organization, I thought I'd be doin' you a favor to tell you about it. I thought you'd want to help him."

Again Hearne grunted his monosyllable, and Tom marveled at the boss's density.

"Why, don't you see? Mickey's got to go, and he can't go unless you send him." There was no sign that the Old Man did see, and Tom had a sudden, sinking feeling somewhere in his internals. "You—you're goin' to send him, ain't you?"

"No."

It was thumbs down for Mickey, and Tom knew the decision was irrevocable. It was almost incredible—Tom could scarcely believe his ears—and utter amazement possessed him for a moment, but only for a moment before it gave way to blind, vicious rage. He was standing directly in front of the boss, and his lanky form bent and stiffened into a fighting posture, his hands clenched, and his jaw thrust out.

"Let me tell you somethin'! By God, I get you! If Mickey was all right, and

just needed money, he'd get it, because you'd figure on usin' him and gettin' your money's worth out o' him, but since he's all in, and you've had the best there is in him, and all there is in him, you'll let him die like a dog. You're makin' no investments in dead ones! That's what a man gets for loyalty and hard work for you. Mickey told me not to come to you. He knew you! He knew it wouldn't do no good. I know you now, and so help me, I'll see to it that every man in the organization knows you for just what you are, you—you—"

"Shut up and get out!"

Hearne leaned forward quickly as he snapped out the words in the tone of authority that is never disputed or resisted, and Tom Duffy surprised himself by backing slowly out of the room.

IV

WHEN you've not yet turned thirty—when you've got a wife for whom you've gone straight from the day you first met her at the Hibernian picnic and she gave you the first smile—when you've got a cozy little flat that's as near heaven as you ever care to get, and a pair of the likeliest kids in the ward—when you've worked hard, early and late, and earned the promotion that is all ready for you—when you've got something to live for—

Well, as Mickey said to his buddy, it was "kinda tough—some jolt!"

Mickey had been afraid to go to the doctor—he had known that it would be bad—but he had not dreamed how bad it could be. "I give you six months at the outside, if you stay here," had been the sentence passed upon him—six months!

Some men take things like that one way, and some another. Mickey started out the one way. He knew the places where there is no Eighteenth Amendment, and when he parted with Tom he went straight to one of them. As he poured out his drink, and a stiff one he made it, his hand shook until he spilled the liquor, and he clutched the glass fiercely, as his nostrils caught the pungent odor. Then a dull, what's-the-use feeling came over him, and he eyed the whisky for a time, after which, slowly and deliberately, he emptied it into a cuspidor.

What was the use! He was all in, and he might just as well quit—give up. Strive as he might, he could not shake himself free from that sense of the utter futility of any-

thing and everything, and he was tired, weary beyond expression, when he forced his steps toward home that evening. He seemed ages older, and he moved heavily, but noiselessly—so noiselessly, indeed, that his entrance into the flat was unnoted by any one of the little group by the front window in the living room.

Mame sat there with the children in her lap. Clutching them, one to either breast, she was gazing over their heads, as if straining her eyes to pierce a future that frightened her, unspeakable woe in every line of her sweet, young face, and the tears coursing down her cheeks. Irene was crying softly, and little Mickey, his chubby face troubled and mystified, was looking up at his mother and patting her with clumsy, loving hands.

Mickey caught his breath sharply and retreated, leaving the flat as silently as he had entered, and hurried down into the street. He beat his fists together, as he strode around the corner into the shadows, and sobbed and blubbered words and phrases that might have been curses, and might have been prayers, and for all their incoherence were something of both. What kind of a yellow dog was he to think of giving up—of quitting—when he had a family like that to take care of! "Mame, there, the prettiest, sweetest, finest girl that ever lived, just eatin' her heart out with grievin' and carin'! And the kids—was there ever two like 'em?"

Could a man quit on folks like them? He could not! He could live and work and fight for them without any lungs, if he had to! He'd tell Doc King and all the doctors in the world to go to hell, and he'd show 'em! And he'd show the Old Man about that ward captaincy business, too! He'd put that over for Mame and the kids if it was the last thing he did on the last day he lived!

It was a changed Mickey who returned to the flat ten minutes after he had left it. His approach was heralded by a cheery, piercing whistle, and he went in with his old-time slam-bang, swooping up his little family in one generous embrace.

"Why, Mickey!" Mame was so startled she hardly knew him. "What ever has happened?"

"Williams is out and I'm to be ward captain!" Mame knew what that meant to him, and her eyes kindled with enthusiasm. "Oh, it's big doin's for the Donnellys,"

Mickey continued. "We're sittin' pretty now!" And he drew her a brilliant picture of a new job, with a great deal more money, and the enhanced social standing that would attend his elevation to the ward leadership. She interrupted him from time to time with excited little comments and exclamations, and she was all aglow with happiness. Presently, however, her face fell—she remembered now!

"I—I thought, maybe—" she began slowly.

"I know what you mean, and that's my best news—I saved it for the last. I saw Doc King to-day, and I'm all right. It's just like I said—nothin' wrong with me except that old cold."

A wild desire to believe triumphed over incredulity, and the sudden relief from the heartbreaking terror that had been with her by night and by day for long, long weeks shocked Mame to the verge of an emotional outburst. Mickey saw it coming and hastened to avert it—he hated tears and scenes.

"You see, Mame, you hadn't any call to worry me about that the way you did. I had enough—"

"Mickey Donnelly"—the outburst came, but took an unexpected turn, instant anger flaming into her cheeks and eyes—"I could shake you until your teeth rattled! You know I haven't had five minutes' sound sleep in months, and that I've been so scared my heart's choked me, and you wouldn't do so much as go to the doctor for the word that 'd set my mind at rest, and now you have the nerve to talk to me about worrying you! I'd like to be a man just ten seconds—I'd worry you!"

With that she flounced out of the room, leaving an amazed Mickey repeating to himself: "Ain't she the Irish, though!"

It was not such a difficult matter for Mickey to live up to the lie he had told Mame. She was anxious to believe that he was all right physically, and he found that the mere setting of his will to it went far toward bracing him up until his appearance and actions were wholly reassuring. He was even able for a time to suppress the cough and the other dread symptoms over which she had agonized, and he was all the better for having himself ceased to worry. He no longer had occasion to worry over his condition—he knew the truth!

He felt, too, that he would accomplish the second task he had set himself—dem-

onstrating to John Hearne that he was fit and able to assume and discharge the responsibilities of the ward captaincy. He simply could not give up without attaining the post toward which he had been working for years; besides, he knew that the promotion would entitle him to a better job in the distribution of patronage following the election, and while he might not hold it long, if worse came to worst, his enhanced prestige in the organization would gain consideration for Mame she might not receive as the widow of a mere precinct committeeman.

Mickey had no reason to fear opposition for the ward leadership. He was not uneasy on that score. The sole question with him was that of making good in the eyes of the boss—he wanted the Old Man to be satisfied with him—and he knew that success in that depended upon his activity and the results he secured in his precinct and ward on election day.

Accordingly he buckled down to work in a manner he had never gone at it before. He undertook to see personally each individual voter who was not known to be "right," placating malcontents, adjusting misunderstandings, bluffing and fighting recalcitrants, and bracing up the wavering and weak-kneed, and he could see that he was getting results.

He completed his ten-day poll, and his book—like those prepared by all the other workers in the organization—recorded every shred of obtainable information relative to every man and woman in his territory, even down to the hour the voter would go or could be brought to the voting booth. Organizations are just that thorough, which is one of the reasons organizations so often win elections.

Then, like a bolt out of a clear sky, came the news that he did have opposition for the post he coveted. Burkhart, of the eleventh precinct, whose support he had counted on, was a candidate against him for the ward leadership.

Mickey learned this at noon on Thursday, five days before the election. At one o'clock that day a hurried meeting of the precinct committeemen was held, without Mickey's even being notified, and Burkhart was elected. The afternoon papers carried the story that it was a throw down for Mickey Donnelly, done per order of the ruthless boss.

"It's all right, Mame; it's all right, I

tell you," Mickey lied manfully that evening. "It wasn't a throw down. The papers are all wrong—they don't understand. You see, it's like this—"

And with that he spun a tale of his complete understanding with John Hearne, and how he had passed up the captaincy because he was slated to get something better. But it was, nevertheless, a throw down, flagrant and staggering. If it had not happened to himself, Mickey would not have believed the Old Man capable of giving anybody in the organization such a raw deal. He could not understand it any more than Tom Duffy could understand Hearne's attitude and reply to the appeal for aid for his buddy. To Mickey it seemed just a little bit more than a man ought to be expected to endure!

V

"WELL, just what was it you sent for me for?"

Mickey did not look up as he asked this question, but gazed abstractedly at the boots of the man who was studying him keenly with one eye. The man had another eye, but it was a vagrant—uncontrollable, wandering, worthless. That was the one thing that marred his patrician presence.

Mickey had received a mysterious message to go to the hotel, take the elevator to the fourth floor, walk up one flight of stairs, and slip unobserved into room 501. He had obeyed the instructions and had found himself in an ordinary guest chamber without any evidences of occupancy, or that it was about to be occupied by any one other than himself. There he had cooled his heels for some fifteen or twenty minutes, and then this man had entered from an adjoining room and announced that he desired to have a talk with Mickey. They had been sparring for some time, without getting anywhere, when Mickey asked his question.

The man was Charles Augustus Crawford, the brains and money back of the Citizens' Committee that had joined forces with the Democrats in the desperate fight to defeat the Republican organization and ticket. He was John Hearne's implacable enemy. He had everything that Hearne lacked—birth, education, and social position—but he lacked and coveted one thing that Hearne had—political power. He was rich—owned that hotel, among other properties—and was reputed owner of a

railroad, the C. C. C. & I., sometimes facetiously referred to as Charley Crawford's Crooked Eye.

Crawford continued to study Mickey with the one eye that would do his bidding.

"Donnelly," he said finally, but ignoring the question that had been put to him, "that was a pretty raw deal you got to-day—pretty raw!"

Mickey started to reply, but thought better of it. He would practice self-restraint. He could not, however, check the color that rose slowly to the roots of his hair, and the eye did not miss that.

"It's a fair sample of what a man gets from that gang as a reward for hard work and loyalty," Crawford continued. He was measuring his words and their effect—not a quickened pulse beat should escape him! "You give years of hard work, the hardest kind of hard work, to John Hearne, and you're as faithful as old dog Trey; you earn promotion—you're entitled to be ward captain—and what do you get? A slap in the face!"

"The next thing you know they'll take away that little job you've got down at city hall, and you and your family can starve." A hard glint came into Mickey's eyes, and the muscles over his jawbones were twitching. "John Hearne and his favorites get everything. They've been fattening for years off the work of such as you. It's a rotten gang, but the worst thing about them is the way they treat men like you."

Crawford let those words sink in for a few moments, and when he resumed he had decided to get to the point. "Donnelly, they're playing you for a fool. Are you one? If you're not, I've a proposition to make to you."

Mickey cleared his throat, but for all that his voice was huskier than ever.

"Spill it!" he said, and then he listened.

"Now"—Crawford had been talking rapidly, earnestly, and he was concluding with just a hint of embarrassment—"you may think it's a bit queer that such methods are used in a reform campaign, but remember there's only one way to fight the devil, and that's with fire. We've got to lick Hearne and his gang before we can clean up the city, and the end justifies any means."

Mickey had twenty-four hours in which to make up his mind as to what he would do. It did not take him that long, for he was human, and the temptation was great.

He had had a raw deal, as the game of politics should be played according to the way he had been taught, and he could not beat down the instinctive desire for revenge. Crawford had given him his chance to get even. Moreover, there was the money, and the cold sweat broke out on his forehead when he thought of how much he needed the money—or, rather, of how greatly Mame and the children would be in need of it. He wouldn't be square, he wouldn't be loyal to them, if he failed to take advantage of the opportunity to make some provision for them.

Hence, a midnight adventure that proved so ridiculously easy it was no adventure at all, and then a cumbersome suit case delivered to room 501, and exchanged for a long, fat envelope that fitted so readily into an inside coat pocket.

And then, as a result of hard work, physical pain, nervous strain, worry, and what not, a certain young henchman of the Republican organization collapsed—caved in, as he called it, later—and was taken home, semiconscious and delirious.

Mame learned the truth about Mickey's condition, at last, from Dr. King. The physician's statement was kindly, but none the less terse and emphatic. It was the blow, long feared, that Mame had thought would kill her when it fell, but, singularly enough, once she knew the worst it no longer seemed so terrible, and she could face the situation calmly and capably—even cheerfully. She asked but the assurance that Mickey had a chance, and when that was given her hope routed the dread specter that had stalked her for months. What had to be done, could be done—would be done!

It was a night, a day, and most of another night before Mame learned the truth about the other thing. She learned it by piecing together the ravings and delirium and by finding the fat packet of crisp yellowbacks, and when Mickey finally awoke, after a few hours of real sleep, and was himself again—repentant, panicky, weak, but himself—it was confirmed.

"I don't know why I did it," he groaned, as the tale was told, "but it's done."

"I know—you did it for us. Listen, Mickey, dear"—laughter actually rippled from her tremulous lips—"you remember what the baseball man said about the money he found under his pillow—he did it for the wife and kiddies!"

"God, Mame, don't make a joke of it!"

"I'd rather laugh than cry about it. Listen, darlin'—you've done wrong, but they can't blame you. You were sick, and worried to death, and they treated you shameful. And maybe it's not too late to undo it, and we'll try our best."

VI

So it came about that all precedents were shattered, and there were three persons present at a conference in the Hole in the Wall, the first of that Monday morning on the day before the election. John Hearne sat in his big swivel chair, and Mame in the little pine kitchen chair, while Mickey stood at the end of the rolltop desk and choked forth his confession.

"Chief—Mr. Hearne—I—I—God! I don't know how to tell you—I—I've sold you out! Crawford's got our poll books—all of them—and they'll clean us up to-morrow. I know it's no excuse, but I was sick, and had to have money, and you turned me down for ward leader, and I got sore, and when Crawford—damn his crooked soul!—sent for me and offered me more money than I'd ever seen, I went crazy. I—I stole the books, and took his money, and there it is—every dirty dollar of it!"

And with that Mickey emptied the fat envelope, the crisp yellowbacks pouring down upon the desk in a golden flood, some of them cascading off into John Hearne's lap, and others darting and gliding gayly to the floor.

"Lord! I wish I was dead!" sobbed the youth, burying his face in his arms on the top of the desk.

Mame had her arms about him in a moment, and faced the boss with pitiful, begging eyes. "Please—he isn't really to blame," she began, but was silenced by a gesture.

"Donnelly," said Hearne, sharply, "stop that foolishness! You did exactly what I wanted you to do. Get that?"

"Wh-what?" Hope strove with incredulity in the voices of both Mickey and Mame, and the old man smiled.

"And you did a good job of it," he added. "Crawford will throw away his own books and send his workers out to-morrow with the ones you turned over to him, with the result that his people will be hustling our voters to the polls and paying no attention to thousands that they might get if they only knew 'em."

"You mean them books were fakes, and that the whole thing was a frame-up on Crawford?" Mickey, apt pupil in all the tricks and devious ways of politics, was grasping the game that had been played, but even yet not quite believing it.

Hearne nodded. "I counted on Crawford doing something crooked—knew he'd try to get our records—and I made you the fall guy he'd go after. It worked!"

Mickey, his knees as weak as water from the reaction, slipped into the little chair and slumped down. "But—but I fell for it, too," he muttered. "I sold you out! You'd never trust me again."

"Why, Mickey"—Mame's heart was singing—"how can you say that, when Mr. Hearne tells you, you did just what he wanted you to do? Why—why you earned all that money, and we can use it to take you out to Arizona and make you all well and strong again. Can't we?" she appealed to Hearne.

"No," the boss smiled grimly, "as Mickey said, it's dirty money. We'll have it fumigated and give it to an orphan asylum, or something. But there'll be plenty of good clean money to take you out West and keep you there as long as you need to stay. You can start as soon as you can get ready, and that shouldn't take long."

"I—I guess I won't be going," said Mickey, dully. "It's too far, and I don't know anybody out there, and all the friends I got here would have forgotten me by the time I got back—if I ever got back. I'm no good, anyhow!"

Mame was in tears, and words of indignant protest were trembling on her lips, but again Hearne signaled her to silence.

"Look this over," he said, drawing a roll of papers from his pocket and passing it over to Mickey. The latter took it listlessly, opened it, and read the first page. There were a few sentences there, scrawled in Tom Duffy's best writing, and then some signatures, and then pages and pages of more signatures. The scrawl read:

We, the undersigned, subscribes the amounts opposite our names to a fund to buy a new pair of lungs for Mickey Donnelly, who has wore out the ones he has a-shouting for the organization, and we instructs him to lose no time getting them. We'll miss him till he's back on the job.

Mickey went through the long list of names—they were all the names of his friends—scores, hundreds of them—and they were all pulling for him!

"Chief," he said, brokenly, "I don't think I'll need the trip. I'm better already!"

Hearne chuckled. "I had to make Duffy pretty mad in order to get him to start out to show you how many friends you've got," he said, "and when I sent for him to see how he was getting along he said that when you read all those signatures one of your

bum lungs would be cured before you started for Arizona. How about it?"

"Another frame-up, huh!" Mickey could grin again, although his eyes were moist and his chin was wobbly. "Well, it works, too. Mame, I guess we'd better go see if we can find them new lungs. A fella can't lay down on his friends!"

Ships That Sail on Silk

STURDY PA PURDY WAS ANCHORED IN THE SOIL, BUT GENTLE
MA PURDY HAD THE SOUL OF AN EXPLORER

By Genevieve Neergaard

EVEN before Pa Purdy turned the mare out of the schoolhouse gate and up the black and silver road toward home, he sensed there was something wrong with Ma Purdy.

Under the lacy shadow of her scarf her small, white head was high. To the jogging of the phaeton she yielded not a whit.

Leaves made a soft, swishing against the canopy; under Loretta's slow hoofs pebbles crunched. It was a peaceful sound, pa thought.

A faint pulse of music floated up from the schoolhouse in the hollow, where the clustered lights showed that the young folks were still dancing. It'd be eleven or after before they'd stop. Well, young uns had to have their fun. Pa settled in his seat, one foot on the dash, lines slack.

"Pretty nice party, wasn't it, ma? Makes a feller feel his oats somehow—fancy dress doin't like that. Say, that little schoolma'am is a mighty smart girl—the way she drilled them young uns for the play they put on before the dancin'. They did right good, I thought. I dunno but what you could 'a' done better, though; I told her so, too. 'You'd oughta asked my wife to help you,' says I. 'She was a real stage actress!' I tells her. 'There wasn't a better one ever played at the old opera house; no, nor a prettier!' says I. 'My, that must 'a' been a long time ago,' says she. 'Thirty years! That's a heap longer'n you're old!' says I!"

Pa paused to chuckle, slapping his knee

with a hard brown hand. "She seemed a real nice girl; takes an interest in folks."

"It looked like you thought so."

"I liked her right well," said pa, innocently, calmly.

"Humph! I guess nobody had much doubt about that!"

Mildly he faced her, saw the flash of eyes that had somehow kept the look of April throughout the years, heard the slight *tap-tap* of her slipped toe against the floor of the phaeton, and was warned. He'd best keep still; ma was put out about something, that was plain—but what?

It wouldn't do any good to ask her, like as not if he did, she'd deny it; she was a great one for keeping things to herself. Close-mouthed, ma was; funny, too, pa reflected, when he was such a talky cuss.

He shifted the lines with a "G'long, L'retta," and out of the corner of a wary eye stole a glance at ma. She looked sweet enough to eat, in that fancy Spanish doo-fangle of hers and the red rose in her hair.

Some might think she was showin' a mite too much shoulder, lettin' that shawl thing drop off that way, but not him. No siree; he was a great hand for a good-lookin' woman, and ma—well, ma was the queen of 'em all!

II

LAND! How she'd turned the years back for him to-night, coming downstairs dressed up like that! Why, it was the very same rig

she'd used to do that Spanish dance in, back in the days when he was courting her.

Nellie Neville, with her black hair drawn smooth, and her shining springtime eyes! An elfin thing she was. What had she seen in a clumsy-tongued clohopper like him? A farmer with muscles set to the strain of the plow; a rough tiller of the earth.

What had she seen in him? His big hands could span her waist, so frail she was, so slim, and yet the sweep of her lashes had the power to smite him dumb. Sitting in the stage box with new black broadcloth claspings him like iron, his eyes full of dancing, blowing, eager flame that was Nellie Neville, his heart had nearly burst with the bounty of his love for her, the wonder of her love for him.

They had been married within the week; a runaway match theirs, the fortnight's gossip of the countryside. On their wedding night he had waited for her in the narrow wood paved alley, and when the stage door had at last opened, and she'd stood there under the dingy globe, and smiled at him over her small mink muff, he had heard the stars singing around his head. Romance she was to him, and all dreaming; beauty and love—and she was his!

Thirty years! And now the alchemy of moonlight lay white upon her, so that pa felt a stirring in his old veins, and, leaning closer, curved an arm about her shoulders. "You look mighty sweet, ma," he told her, and got a sniff for his pains.

Their own gate reached, Loretta turned in and came to a stop beneath the twin poplars that he had planted for ma, beside the steps. Great trees they were now, shafts of bright leaves and gentle shade. Pa drew a long breath. "Seems real nice, after all the clatter, to come home again, where everythin's so sort of quiet, don't it, ma?"

But even then she wouldn't answer him. She got down out of the phaeton, full skirts held away from the wheel, and went up the front steps with her small face a cameo of wrath.

Pa watched her fish the key out of the hanging basket, and when the door swung to behind her he scratched his head and sighed. Seemed funny he never could learn how to manage ma—she was like a colt; a willful, wild young thing she seemed to him, for all her sixty years. Well, wasn't that why he loved her? Kept him guessin', ma did.

He lit a lantern and stabled the mare.

Coming back from the barn he stood for a moment on the front stoop, head bare to the silver night. A clean, spare old man, stooped, with arms that swung a trifle long at his sides. His were guileless, ice-blue eyes. A kindly old man, looking out over his own acres with a gentle and contented heart; rich green acres, rolling like a phosphorescent sea in the moonlight.

Slowly he filled his pipe, and pulled deeply on it. It was good to smoke out here in the dark and the quiet. Far down in the hollow he could see the handful of lights that marked the village; through the slightly stirring trees they winked like stars.

Somewhere across the valley a dog barked; another took it up, a third; for a space they chorused furiously, worrying the night to shreds, then wearied of it. Silence knit the fabric whole again.

Pa sat down on the top step, his knees apart, elbows resting on them, with pipe cupped in calloused hand. Peaceful, that's what it was. By gorry, they was lucky, he and ma. Here they were come to their old age in comfort and plenty; nothing to worry them; not wanting for food nor for warmth; their children were settled happy and snug; they both had their health, he was strong and hale as an old oak, and ma—well, there was that nagging little pain in her side, sometimes.

Doc Trimble had said that it didn't amount to anything, but somehow pa didn't like it. S'pose Doc Trimble was wrong? S'pose—pa's teeth closed sharply on his pipestem—s'pose—. Oh, shucks! Here he was stewin' himself into a fret over a notion! Doc Trimble knew his business, of course he did. Well, then, lucky old folks, that's what they was.

By gorry, they'd earned it, though; they'd pulled together every step of the way, he in the fields, ma in the house. His folks had said it was chancy to marry an actress; she'd run him into debt in no time, a young farmer just starting his own place; she'd always be wanting things, wanting to gad here, wanting to gad there, never willing to lift a finger. Actress blood was wild blood, and blood would tell, they'd said.

Pa chuckled. Huh! She'd fooled 'em, ma had! Land! How she'd settled down. Why, her jams and preserves had took first prize at the fair twenty-five years runnin', and her hit'n'miss hooked rugs were the envy of the country for miles around. Always at something to make the house look pretty.

Take their parlor now, cram full of jim-cracks that she'd rigged up herself. There was the picture over the mantel-shelf that folks come miles to see—all made out of pieces cut from magazines, it was; there was angels and flowers and cats and birds and folks and big white clouds, and in the center a shining sun cut out of gold paper all pointed like rays—say, it was pretty.

There were hair wreaths, and seashell flowers, and a scene all made of feathers, and a big box all of gilded pine cones sawed in half and glued on, fancy. Ma never liked to look at that box. She'd make it the winter their little girl was sickening for death, and afterward she'd hidden it away and it'd been a long time before she'd made anything again.

It was a quilt she sewed next; all put together out of bits of silk—there was a dark-blue ocean with zigzag waves and, goin' full tilt over it, a ship with all sails spread. Land! It was funny how sort of—*flyin'* that little silk ship looked, as if ma'd sewed a dream right into those scraps of colored cloth.

She could 'a' got a prize with that, only she'd never show it; she kept it folded up on the top shelf of the wardrobe, and once he had come in from the fields and found her cryin' over it. Funny how ma was; temperamental, pa guessed you'd call it.

Take the way she was about dressin' up for this doin's to-night—it'd been months since he'd seen her so excited. Like a little girl she'd been, goin' to her first party. In the moonlight the old man smiled; yes, sir, she was like that, ma.

III

His pipe was empty now. He tapped it slowly on the step, and put it in his pocket. He'd best go in; ma'd be wondering what was keeping him.

But ma wasn't wondering. She lay on the far side of the high maple bed with her face turned to the wall, and when pa leaned over her he thought he saw her eyelids quiver faintly.

"Ma, you asleep?" he whispered, but she didn't answer him, so he tiptoed into the hall and undressed there, so as not to awaken her.

Vague dreams came to him; he thought he heard some one sobbing—stirred, dozed; awoke again to a tremor of the bed, a queer subdued choking. His eyes, opening reluc-

tantly, saw that the window was pallid with dawn. The muffled sound went on; he turned over to find ma's gray pigtail agitated with her sobbing.

"Why, ma! What ails you?"

She lifted a face of woe from the crook of her arm; a face all blotched and crumpled with tears. Pa saw that the pillow slip beneath her cheek was wet.

"You lay down and keep quiet while I run for Doc Trimble." Pa was half dressed now, hitching into his suspenders, shirt tails hanging. Panic was in him, lending him speed. S'pose ma was to be took sick! S'pose something was to—*happen*—to ma! He started for the door, hair ruffled like clean white feathers. "You just hold on, ma, and I'll fetch help in a jiffy."

"Barzillai Purdy, come back here!" In the gray light she reared herself up on her elbow, very small and white in the wide old bed. "Come here—ain't you got eyes in your head? There's nothing wrong with me—that a doctor can cure."

"But—you're cryin', ma! It ain't like you to act this way—what is it? Tell me."

She sat up now; pa tucked the patchwork quilt around her shoulders, and with a rough and awkward hand smoothed her hair. Her forehead felt hot and dry. "There now, ma, I shouldn't wonder but what it was too much for you last night. All that excitement—the band and the dancin' and all—"

"Excitement! Oh, my Lord!" Ma's voice arose to a wail.

"Ma! What is it?" A new alarm stabbed at pa. "You ain't had bad news from the boys—news you're keepin' from me?"

Ma shook her head. "It's me," she said. "I got to get away from here."

"Away? But why, ma?"

"I got to get away!" Her hands were beating together blindly now. "This place—I got to get away from it!"

"Why, ma, you mean—you ain't happy here? You mean—you don't like the place?"

"I hate it."

Slowly pa sat down on the edge of the bed, his knees struck to water by the unbelievable thing she had said. "But—but you—never let on—you felt that way." The words came dully. His own voice sounded far away and strange to him. "You was—always singin' around—always sewin' some kind of pretties for the house!"

Ma's eyes dilated; the pupils spread over the gray of her iris like swift stains.

"Because if I hadn't I'd a gone crazy—mad! I was never one to complain, long's I can stand a thing. No good ever came of nagging—so I just kept it to myself—the loneliness and all—the wanting to be off and away—to go places—see things—" She pointed to her deep wicker darning basket, where it stood on the window seat. "You bring that here, pa; I got something to show you."

When he stood beside her with the basket in his arms she pulled away a layer of drab, twisted socks. "Look, pa!"

Shoulder touching hers, he peered down. Why, say, ma must 'a' gone crazy! It was a globe, a little globe such as young uns used in school. A shabby thing it was, with its faded oceans and its scuffed continents; it lay in the bottom of the deep basket in a rat's nest of newspaper scraps and colored folders. Pa eyed the mess in bewilderment, and reaching out a curious hand, picked up the little sphere. "What's it for, ma?" he queried.

"It's places away, pa—don't you see? Far off—like Africa and Australia, maybe. It's rivers and lakes and cities. Oh, most of all cities, pa! Places where things happen—places where there's bright lights and bands playing in the streets sometimes, and people pushing and crowding on the sidewalks. Life, pa, that's what! Life. *This*—" She made a gesture toward the opal-tinted fields outside their window, sloping fresh to the rising sun. "All this—I hate it!"

"But, ma, it's so peaceful!"

"So's a graveyard!" Scorn crackled in her voice. "It's dry rot, that's what it is, living way off in the hills like this. It's being dead on your feet and not knowing it!" She reached out, turned the globe in his hands. "There's India, see, pa, and Arabia. Land! Just think of all the things that's happening—everywhere!"

Pa nodded patiently. "Yes, ma, I see; but what's that got to do with us?"

Shining now were ma's April eyes. "Oh, pa, I want us to go there! Somewhere away—I want to go wandering and wandering, and never stop!"

"Why, ma, I never heard such talk!" Amazement puckered pa's face.

"No, and I guess maybe I could 'a' gone to my grave without your ever knowing how I felt if it hadn't been for last night. Oh, my land! The way you acted!"

"Why, ma—"

"Don't you 'Why ma—' me, Barzillai

Purdy! I haven't got eyes in my head for nothing! The idea—a man of your age! Creaking your old bones on a dance floor, setting the neighbors to talking, carrying on with a chit of a girl while your own wife, that could 'a' had millionaires at her feet in her day, sits against the wall! I did a heap of thinking, too, while you were cavorting around like—like an old goat. Oh, yes, you did, and the more shame to you!"

"But, ma— Why, you ain't *jealous*?"

IV

"JEALOUS!" Two red spots glowed high on ma's cheek bones. "Jealous! Humph! I should say not! I've never been jealous in my life, and I don't expect to start in now—the idea!"

"We-ell, she as much as asked me to dance with her, ma. 'Mr. Purdy,' says she, 'you're never goin' to tell me that a handsome man like you don't dance!' Those were her very words. 'Course I knew she was just funnin', but she hooked her hand through my arm so chummylike— A man can't be churlish to a pretty little thing like her. Can he, ma?"

"A pretty little thing like her! Huh! I wonder what she'd look like if she was to spend thirty years hid away on a farm, working her fingers to the bone keeping house for a man? I've been a fool, Barzillai Purdy; I can see that now! Well, it isn't too late to change—I'm through with this place. I'm through with cooking, and washing, an ironing. I'm through with puttering around in a truck garden till my hands look like roots! I'm through with all of it, and I'm going away from here if it's the last thing I do on this earth!"

"But where, ma?"

"Across the ocean—that's where! I want we should sell the place and go across the ocean!"

"Across the ocean!" Pa's jaw dropped. As if ma's words had set a ship beneath his feet, the room seemed to be dipping and swaying about him. He reached out, and steadied himself against the carved bedpost.

There it was—ma's wild blood! Pulling at her—drawing her away. And what could he do about it? Maybe his folks had been right after all; marrying an actress *was* a chancy business! Look at ma! Thirty years steady as a church, and then to go off on a tangent like this!

What had she said? "I just kept it to myself—the wanting to be off and away."

Pa moved his head from side to side; he felt goaded, dumb. What could he do?

Why, here he'd thought she was happy! He'd come softly down the sunset slope, thanking God for the peace and plenty of their days, and all the time this wild thing in ma had been crying out to be free and away—to go across the ocean!

"But—but what'd we want to do that for, ma?" he protested. "Why, there ain't nobody but foreigners there! Like as not they'd even talk funny so's we couldn't understand a word they said. What'd we do then, I'd like to know, two old folks so far from home?"

Ma's face fell. "Why—why—I never thought of that!" she said.

Pa gasped. Never thought of that! There you were—that was wild and crazy for you, and no mistake! Well, he threw out his chest there in the early morning sunlight, he'd take care of that. A firm hand, that's what ma needed. A firm hand, and he was the one to give it to her.

"You get all these fool notions out of your head, ma, the quicker the better. Traipsin' off halfway round the world, and then maybe not know how to ask for our daily bread."

"But, pa, you mean you won't sell the place?"

"That's just what I mean, ma. Here we are and here we'll die. The idea—two old folks like us. No, siree." Pa's tone was resolute.

He expected her to get mad and flare up at him; or maybe cry, but she didn't. She just looked at him, and pa, watching her uneasily, saw the color drain out of her face until it seemed that in that small white oval only her great gray eyes were alive. Then very quietly she lay down, and turned her face to the wall.

And now, in the days that followed, a strange subterranean warfare was waged in the square old house. Ma entrenched herself in silence.

"Ma, you know the black hen that's got her nest in the tool shed? She hatched three eggs last night. Better come see."

No look or sign that she had heard.

Or, coming home from the village with the provisions: "I was snoopin' around down to the drug store—found this: somethin' new, Carter says." And he would toss a bar of candy into her lap—a flag of truce which she would promptly put from her in silent dignity.

8

All right; she needn't answer him, then! She could be just as mean and as cussed as she wanted to. See if he cared! Angered, he'd fling out to the barn. But somehow he always came back, drawn by the loneliness that filled him.

Why, things wasn't the same unless he could talk 'em over with ma! Yet that was funny, too—there was one thing he couldn't have said to her; even if she'd been friends with him, he couldn't have told her how he felt about the land.

It was something he hardly understood himself; the tie that held him there. Dumbly he felt that the land was part of him, just as he was part of it. It gave him his food and the trees that sheltered him. He could feel its firm strength, like a great steady hand, upholding him. He knew that it would fold him in close rest at the end.

The earth—he loved it. And here was ma, wanting him to turn his back on it—to give up the yielding turf, with green things springing, for the hard gray of pavements; the great, low-hanging yellow stars for the glare of colored lights, jiggling crazily. Wanting him to leave it all—sulking because he wouldn't! Well, let her sulk. He didn't care.

V

For a week it went on, while pa grew more lorn every day; and then, quite simply, ma won.

She complained of the pain in her side.

Pa had gone to the attic to look for his old hip boots. He found ma sitting hunched on a trunk in a shaft of dusty sunlight. There, spread across her knees, was the patchwork quilt with the ship on it, and she was trailing one hand over the blue silk sea like it was real, while in her eyes there was a funny far-away shine, a sort of still, listening look that frightened pa.

It was as if she were seeing things he couldn't see, hearing sounds he couldn't hear. And when a board creaked under his foot she gave a sharp little cry and started to her feet, and the quilt slipped, a blue and white billow, to the floor.

"Why, ma, I didn't mean to scare you. I—" and then he saw that her hand was pressed against her side, and fear took hold of him. "Ma—your side. What you got your hand there for?"

She took her hand away, and looked at it curiously. "My side? Why, I—" Into her eyes, as she faced him, came an odd light

then. Afterward pa remembered it, wondering, but now he was conscious only of that veined old hand trembling slightly.

"I—that pain's come back," she said.

"I'll get Doc Trimble—"

"No—pa—wait!" With nervous fingers she was picking at his sleeve. "Don't bother—it's just the housework, I guess—the lifting and all. If we was in the city now—I could go to a good doctor and find out—but, there, we ain't, so there's an end to it. I dunno's I put much faith in Doc Trimble. Just let it go, pa. I'll be all right." The little smile she gave him was so brave it brought a lump to his throat.

Well, she'd won. Ma'd won, but somehow he lacked the words to tell her so. Awkwardly he tiptoed down the narrow stairs and out into the wood shed. He found a clean pine plank, a pot of paint, and out of the dusty tool box dug a scrubby brush.

Sitting on the chopping block, elbows on his knees, head low, pa pondered. A fine sort of a man he was—lettin' ma get sick right under his eyes and stickin' to his stubborn ways through it all!

The shiny, blue-black rooster came high-stepping in at the open door, circled curiously about him, and went out again. A fly, enmeshed in the corner of the cob-webbed pane, droned endlessly.

Pa Purdy stood up at last, a bent old man with a beaten, drooping look. Very slowly he dipped the brush into the thick black paint, very slowly he drew it across the clean pine plank.

Starkly the letters stared up at him, stared until they began to blurr strangely—*For Sale*. Well, he loved the place, with all his heart he loved it, but somehow—he guessed he loved ma more.

It was funny how ma picked up, now that the sign was nailed to the gatepost. It was as if the pain in her side had never been, she was so full of energy. She pinned a towel over her white hair and went through the house behind a busy broom, until the sharp scent of cleanliness was everywhere, and pa was as uncomfortable as a lost dog at a circus. He retreated to the barn at last, and felt his world break up around him.

Neighbors riding by stopped in to ask about the sign. He was never goin' to sell? Place wouldn't seem the same without the Purdys! They wouldn't know what to do, come fair time, without ma's exhibits—Land, no!

And pa, swallowing a trifle frequently, allowed it was about time him and ma got a taste of city life. Wasn't that he didn't like the farm real well and all, but he guessed he'd like the city, too. No use in a man's tyin' himself up to one place all his days. No, sir, a little change was what a feller needed to keep him young, by gorry!

Odd though, how old pa began to feel. Ma bloomed steadily; she sent for a fashion magazine, and spent hours fussing through the boxes on the wardrobe shelves, freshening a bit of ribbon here, steaming a length of velvet there, cutting, basting, fitting by the aid of the long mirror between the parlor windows.

"I've got to have something stylish to wear, pa," she told him. "Everybody's a lot dressier there than they are around here. That hem hang straight? I declare I don't know but what it'd been a good plan to have got in Miss Stebbins."

"Looks straight to me. Ain't it a mite short, ma?"

"Land, no! They wear 'em that way in the city."

"Oh!"

She took to cutting lists as long as her arm from the occasional city paper pa brought home from the village—lists of steamship sailings; lists of apartments to let; lists for almost anything that would serve as a peg for her to hang a plan on! "Pa, see this? 'Winter at Bermuda, stroll under the blue skies by the side of a bluer surf.' My, don't that sound grand!"

"Yes, but ma, this is only June. Winter's a long way off."

"We-ell. Oh, pa, here's something that reads fine! You take it. I got to get these bastings out. Here."

Pa took a strip in a limp hand and over his steel rimmed spectacles peered at it earnestly. "I can't make head nor tail of it, ma."

"It's an apartment to rent, pa, furnished."

"Oh. This here 'w. b.' now, what's that, ma?"

"Wall bed, pa. That's the way folks sleep nowadays. Beds that slide back under a sideboard or a bookcase maybe, so's they're out of the way daytimes."

"Slide under a sideboard!" Horror shrilled in pa's tones. "Why, that ain't—I declare, it ain't decent. You mean to say there ain't no Christian bedroom?"

"'Course not, pa. See—" She leaned to

him, moved a wrinkled forefinger down the line of print. "Here where it says 'h'w'd fl's'—that means I won't have to sweep another carpet the rest of my days; you just run a rag over the floor and it shines like glass. Mis' Stevens, that was visiting the minister's wife, told me all about the city places. Why, they got hot water all night long."

"We-ell. I dunno what a body'd want with it, come night time. I bet you got to pay high for all this newfangled truck! What's this 'st. ht.'?"

"That's the best part of all, pa. Steam heat; that means you won't have to chop another chunk of firewood long's you live. They got little pipes that run along the wall, and that's what keeps your place warm. Ain't it wonderful, pa?"

"But won't there be no open fires, ma? Why, remember how the kids used to pop corn in the settin' room, come winter nights? It—it'd seem funny—kind of—not to have an open fire."

Ma snipped a basting with a click of her teeth. "You'll get used to it, pa," she said.

Well, he s'posed he would. Feller'd get used to hangin' if he tried it long enough. Dreams began to disturb pa now; nightmares of being shut away in one of those newfangled beds, under a sideboard maybe, and left there, forgotten, to starve. Often he would awaken trembling and covered with a cold sweat, and clutch at ma's hand as she slept there beside him.

Or perhaps ma would moan lightly in her sleep, and he would lie there peering through the semidarkness at the soft oval of her face, straining to catch the faint sound of her breath.

What did it matter, after all, whether he got used to it or not? The slow, steady trickle of prospective buyers who poked about, and asked questions that were none of their business; the commotion of setting the house in order; even giving it up to strangers—what did anything matter after all, but ma?

VI

AND then the Briggses came.

Pa drove home from the village and found them sitting in the two porch rockers; a furtive little bantam of a man, with a drooping dyed mustache and starved looking hair combed over a bald spot, and a wilted pink in his dusty coat; and a great brown satin mountain of a woman, with the eyes of a

lion tamer in a big pink face that was as creaseless as a child's.

It gave pa a start, that smooth pink face. It was like looking at a mask, somehow. Her hair was different, too, from anything he'd ever seen; red, he guessed, you'd call it, though it was nearer to purple to his way of thinking—purple, and all bunched out like dusty grapes under a regular little girl's hat. Funny—

From the porch railing ma spoke to him. "Pa, here's folks from the city was driving by and see our sign. I've showed 'em all over, and they say they like the place fine. Mis' Briggs, meet my husband. Mr. Briggs, Mr. Purdy."

The two men shook hands; the stranger cleared his throat. "Nice little farm you have here, Mr. Purdy. The wife and me were driving by—great weather for driving—we—we thought we'd come in and look your place over. The wife—she's got a notion she wants to move to the country."

"I'll do the talking, Alfred."

The little man's voice trailed to silence; he shuffled his feet, and took up a subdued contemplation of the braided porch rug.

Pa's eyes flew from one to the other, startled. By gorry, he'd bet she was a Tartar, yankin' a man up like that!

"How soon could we move in if I decide to take it?" Mis' Briggs asked.

Pa gulped, but ma arose to the occasion. "It won't take me more'n a day or two to get out, long's you folks want to buy the furniture, too."

"Well, I got my mind made up. There's reasons why the sooner we move in the better."

"But, Cassie—" Desperately the small, furtive man broke in.

The brown satin mountain fixed him with a significant eye. "Al-fred!" she warned, and he seemed to wilt. She turned to ma. "Men—they don't always know what's best for them. I came into money last week. It's my money that'll buy the place, so Alfred hasn't got a thing to say about it."

A swift pang of pity for the little man smote pa; by gorry, it was funny about women. He knew what it was to be yanked from pillar to post! "I—I ain't real sure your husband could make a go of farmin', ma'am, if he's dead set against it—you have to kind of—care—or the land won't yield so good."

Mis' Briggs waved a plump hand. "He'll get used to it," she said. "Anyhow, there's

reasons why he's better off here." Again that mysterious look, under whose cold, pale light Alfred appeared to wince. "To-morrow we'll come down with the papers, and we can sign up; then next week we can move in."

Next week they could move in! Pa felt as if the words were tangible things closing in upon him, trapping him, stifling him. Dimly he shook hands with Alfred, dimly he watched the Briggs's car drive off, and when ma threw joyful arms about him, for one awful moment, he almost hated her. Blindly he flung away from her, and hid himself in the barn.

To-morrow they'd come and sign—and next week they'd move in! Pa groaned. These two strangers trampin' over the house that belonged to him and to ma! But it wouldn't any more, after to-morrow it wouldn't any more. Pa buried his face in his hands. He wished to-morrow'd never come.

But it did. It came all golden and blue and bright with the song of birds. It came with a bustle and flurry of packing; of last minute plans.

"Pa, I want you should bring down the hidebound trunk soon's you've done your breakfast," or, "Pa, you might's well pack up the fruit jars there on the top shelf in the pantry. They'll come in handy, berry season."

"But, ma, you won't need fruit jars if we're goin' round from pillar to post."

"N-no. Well, let 'em go. I—I forgot. I guess Mis' Briggs can find use for 'em. She don't look like much of a housekeeper to me, though."

"Guess I'll go tidy up the woodshed some." This from pa, with elaborate carelessness. "Might's well chop up a stack of kindling wood, too. Don't s'pose Briggs 'll take hold very good at first."

He was still havened in the shed, a ring of bright chips scattered all about him, when the sound of a motor panting up the hill and turning in at the lane told him that the Briggses had come. It was funny how all-of-a-heap it made him feel; he'd known they'd be here to-day—with his mind he'd known it, but with his heart he'd hoped they wouldn't.

Well, they'd come. There was nothing to do now but put his pen to paper, and it would be over. After all, a man couldn't expect to be happy *all* his days!

When pa got around to the front of the

house he found Alfred sitting alone in a porch rocker, shying pebbles at a rosebush, disconsolately.

"The wife thought she'd like to go over the place once more," he explained. "Wasn't no use my tagging along. Your missis wanted to show her the pantry."

Pa eased himself into the other chair, took out his pipe, filled it slowly. "I guess us men folks ain't much account when it comes to pantries," he observed mildly.

Alfred lifted pale eyes with a sudden flash of resentment. "No, nor anything else, the way it looks! We get dragged around wherever the women want to go." Alfred's soft fist came down on the arm of the chair. "They make me sick!" he confided—and silence fell.

VII

It was a heavy silence, freighted with impotent resistance. Inside the house the two women moved from room to room; pa could hear their footfalls, could hear them go upstairs and, after a space, come down again.

The sound of their voices drifted out through the half open door in a swift patter of give and take, woman talk, a lot o' clatter about nothin'. Why didn't they come out and get it over with?

In the pit of pa's stomach a strange, falling sensation persisted; he'd felt like that the first time he ever rode on an express elevator, a swift dropping into space, a letting go of all volition. To get it over with, to finish the thing up so that he could go away out of sight was all that pa craved now; and still the women dawdled and gabbed.

Tags of talk came out to the two men waiting there; Mis' Briggs's voice shrill in praise of the picture in the parlor, ma's deprecating tones. "Land, it ain't anything to speak of—just something to do, evenings. They get pretty long in winter time, everything so quiet and all, no place to go but prayer meetin', unless you drive clear down to the village to a show."

"Well, they can't get too long for me, or too quiet!" This in hearty accents from Mis' Briggs. "If you knew how glad I am to get away from the city!"

"Now ain't folks funny?" ma broke in. "Here you are dying to get away from the city, and me dying to get there!"

"Well, all I can say is, unless you got one man in a million you'll be glad enough

to get back! Men, they have to be handled like cracked eggs—the older they get the worse mess they make when they fall! And they can't be trusted; not a one of 'em. Put 'em where there's pretty faces and they'll go chasing off after a new one every time you got your eyes off 'em."

Mis' Briggs lowered her voice, and pa strained fascinated ears. "Take Alfred now. I had my face lifted two months ago, like to've died of it, too, and right while I was in the hospital—ice bags to my face day and night, mind you—what did Alfred do but—" Here a whisper defeated pa. He only caught ma's shocked gasp, her tremulous "My land!"

Pa's eyes flew to Alfred's face. He didn't look like the kind of a feller a body'd need to whisper about; real plain, pa thought him. But there it was—you could never tell. And, under pa's gaze, the gray little man seemed to swell visibly. His chest strained a bit at his fancy vest, his chin shot forward a fraction of an inch, in his eyes there was a conscious, doggish look.

Confidentially he hitched his chair along the porch until he sat knee to knee with pa; confidentially, too, he reached out a suggestive elbow and dug pa in the ribs. "Say, it's an ill wind that don't blow nobody some good, as the feller says! Now, take you and me for example. You don't want to move to the city, do you?"

"You bet I don't!" pa exclaimed with fervor.

"Well, that's because you don't know what's coming to you. Say, you just go stand on the corner of Powell and Market when it's windy. Gosh! It's as good as a burlesque show! Many's the time I've stood there all day looking 'em over, little prancy ones with black snappy eyes, big tall ones with gray squirrel coats and maybe orchids pinned to 'em, red-headed ones with skin like flowers sort of. They smell like flowers, too, when they go by, all of 'em. Queens, that's what they are, little queens."

Alfred had closed meditative eyes. "I like the young ones best," he added.

A pause fell, and pa rocked and puffed, slowly. There was silence from the house now. The two women were out in the truck garden, maybe; ma took a lot of pride in her garden. She'd want to show it off to Mis' Briggs.

In the chair beside his own, Alfred cleared his throat. "Er—I don't s'pose there's

many lookers around these parts—no class to these country girls, I guess, eh?"

"Why, I—" Pa shook his head vaguely. "I dunno. I never noticed."

"Never noticed!" Alfred was explosive. "Well, for cryin' out loud! What you got eyes in your head for? Say, you'll pick up when you get to living in the city. Tell you what I'll do—you won't be acquainted much at first—apt to get dull for you. Now I got a friend, a lady friend, that'll be glad to show a good time to any friend of mine. You just drop down to the Royal Cafeteria, where she works, and tell her I sent you. Goldie Gray, her name is; one of them dizzy blondes. Say, she'll treat you fine!"

Pa squirmed. "Much obliged," he said. "Oh, *that's* all right. Glad to do it for you." Alfred screened his mouth with his hand. "Better not let the wife catch on to it," he warned. "Women are hell when it comes to a man's having a little fun."

Pa got up abruptly, his mouth wry with disgust. "Guess I'll go look for ma," he said, and fled to the big clean barn. He'd had enough of Alfred Briggs. When he pictured him here in the high dim stable, harnessing Loretta, milking the two sad-eyed Jerseys, forking great sweet-smelling piles of hay down from the loft, dipping his soft, moist hand into the sliding grain of the feedbox, pa groaned.

By gorry, he'd pretty near rather burn the old place down and be done with it than to let that—that he-hussy have it! A dirty old he-hussy, that's what he was—and he was goin' to take pa's place here.

Pa buried his head in his hands, rumpling his clean white hair. Sounds from outdoors came to him faintly—an occasional squawk from the chicken yard behind the barn, the creak of the windmill in the slow June breeze, the *chug-chug* of a motor, the blare of a horn on the turn just below their gate—

Well, he'd best get in; there were all them papers to sign; might as well get at it and finish the thing up; no use settin' here mopin'. Stiffly pa got to his feet, and went out into the sunlight and up the path to the house, blinking in the unaccustomed brightness after the shadowy haven of the barn.

VIII

AND when he came to the porch he found ma sitting there in her favorite chair, with her gay carpet rags all about her, rocking calmly, while the driveway stood empty, patterned in sun and deep blue shade.

"Why, ma—the Briggses?"

Ma took up a length of blue, and joined it to a coil of magenta and yellow. "They're gone," she said, and bent to rummage through the box at her feet. "Seems like a strip of green ought to go right here, a piece of that silk dress I had summer before last, maybe."

"But, ma—the sale? We was to finish it up to-day!"

Placidly the chair swayed back and forth. "It's finished," said ma, and threaded her needle with strong black thread.

Pa's knees gave out beneath him. He sat down on the top step, limp. "Seems like—you was a mite high-handed, ma—signin' away the place without even callin' me in—I—I dunno's it 'll be lawful." He took out his knife and began whittling slowly at a bit of twig. "When are we movin' out, ma?" he asked, bravely.

"When I've got a heap less horse sense than I've got now!" said ma, and set her chair to swinging wildly.

"But, ma—"

"That's enough, Barzillai Purdy! I haven't got ears on my head for nothing! You and that rip of a Briggs, planning your deviltry. Oh, the things Mis' Briggs has to put up with from that man! It's enough to turn her hair white! And if you'd got up to that sinful place you'd 'a' been just the same."

"Why, ma!"

"It won't do you a mite of good to argue. I've got my mind made up."

"But your side, ma—that pain!"

And then a surprising thing happened. Ma covered her face with her hands, and tears began to trickle down through her latticed fingers.

"Ma! What is it?"

But she only rocked back and forth, and cried until pa got to his stiff old knees there on the porch at her feet, and pulled the shielding hands away.

"Look here, ma, if there's anythin' wrong with you I want to know about it right now. We—we'll face it together, ma, somehow. Is it the pain, ma?"

"Oh, pa, I've been a wicked, wicked woman! I—I lied to you, just to get my own stubborn way. I made out that pain a heap sight worse than it was, pa. I guess it come near bein' a judgment on me, too."

She gulped, her old throat working. "Pa—the world ain't what it used to be in my day. S'pose—" She caught at his arm, held there frantically. "Oh, pa, s'pose I'd got you up there in the midst of all them temptations and—*lost you!*"

Under his hands her thin old shoulders were quivering; tears ran down her cheeks, making all the furrows shiny, gathering in the little puckers beside her chin. A wrinkled, bent old woman huddled in a carpet bottomed chair, crying openly, as a child would cry, with gulps and sniffs and small sharp catches in her breath—a wrinkled, bent old woman, but to pa, kneeling there beside her, she was Nellie Neville still, an elfin thing, all sudden gusts and gleams, a willful, wild young thing, for all her sixty years—a voyager in ships of silk.

Pa fumbled in his back pocket and brought out a folded handkerchief. "There, there, ma—you quit! Why, you got regular lakes there! You stop, ma."

"Oh, pa—" Her eyes were suddenly dark through the mist of tears. "Oh, the things that might have happened to you if I hadn't found out in time! Pa—" Her clutch on his arm was desperate. "Promise me, pa, you'll never say another word about leavin' this place to the longest day we live. *Promise me!*"

Leisurely pa got to his feet, took out his pipe, filled it, lit it, and cupped it in the palm of a hard, old hand while the blue smoke curled against the still air.

"We-ell, if you're so set on it, ma, I dunno but what I'd just as soon," he said.

WISHES

A PLAIN white cottage, three rooms up and down,
A flower-bordered walk at edge of town,
A little car to take us where we will . . .
Through busy city streets on wood-lanes still . . .
A dear one sitting there across from me . . .
That's all I ask of living ecstasy!

Peter A. Lea

The Mink Coat

WHY ROY ROUSSELLE'S WIFE WARNED HER HUSBAND THAT HE WAS TOO CLEVER FOR HIS OWN GOOD

By Alvin F. Harlow

"WHEN we get to New York," announced young Mrs. Roussele, as they sat at breakfast in the diner, "I've got to buy some new clothes."

"Positively!" agreed her husband, in his whimsical way, but with a touch of caressing admiration in his quick glance at her.

She was, indeed, a wife in whose appearance a man might take pride—trim and comely in face and figure, clean of skin, with soft, wavy, tawny hair. Her mouth was capable of being, perhaps, just a trifle hard, and her blue eyes were somewhat icy at times; but there were reasons for these things, as will appear.

"I'd thought of that," Mr. Roussele went on. "Mustn't get to looking shabby, girly. It 'll be a great opportunity—late October, and all the new winter styles in full blossom. You can shop till you drop, just so you don't buy too much."

Elsie affected a scowl at him.

"I wonder how much can I spend?"

"Don't know till I see how things work out. Pick up a dress or two, but don't buy any sables for a few days. Just look around and size up the market."

"Seriously, Roy, couldn't I have a new fur coat this fall? That old pony of mine is getting so mangy and out of style that I'm ashamed to be seen with it; and from now on I'll have to have winter wraps, you know."

"Sure you can have a fur coat," he declared emphatically; "but I don't know yet just what kind. There are furs and furs, as you've probably heard, and their cost varies considerably. You shall have the best we can afford, and maybe, before we leave town, we'll be able to afford a better one than we could now. I'm hoping to do some good business in New York—maybe pull off one or two coups, as the

saying is, that 'll put us in the J. Morpont Piergan class. Just get along with your cloth fall coat for a few days, and we'll see."

He told her no more than that of what he hoped or expected to do in the metropolis. Beyond the fact that he was a stock and bond salesman, taking frequent flyers of his own on the side, she knew little of the details of his business. He made frequent casual references to sales he had made, bonds he was handling, and men with whom he did business, as if she knew all about them; but if she began to ask questions, he was usually too hurried or too busy with his newspaper to give her much satisfaction, or perhaps he would start on an explanation and wander off into some other subject. She suspected that he didn't want her to know too much.

He had a captivating way with most people. His thin, silken-smooth, alert face, which grew very narrow down at the chin, was almost handsome. His dark eyes and almost black hair accentuated the clean paleness of his skin. Not until you were squarely in front of him did you notice that his eyes had a slightly Oriental slant and depths of inscrutability that were equally exotic.

His present mission was, as he put it to his wife, for the purpose of introducing New York and other Eastern cities to a fine line of Southwestern securities. Nothing off color—one doesn't mean to intimate that. The New Orleans bond house with which he had been connected for a year or more past, had never had trouble with the postal authorities, and was even in tolerably good odor with the fussy Better Business Bureau. Roussele had a good connection in New York—the well known Wall Street stock and bond firm of Heilmach & Harris; and he expected to split

a few commissions with them on the present trip. In fact, so he told Elsie, he might some day throw in with them for keeps. A fellow could make a lot more money in New York than New Orleans.

"For instance," he pointed out, as the taxicab took them from the Pennsylvania Station to the Vandoria Hotel, "if I were working around among these Eastern millionaires, it wouldn't be any strain at all on the old wallet for us to stop a few weeks at the Vandoria. Why, we might even take a suite and live there!"

He was always dreaming dreams like that—and then trying by hook or crook to make them come true. As matters lay at present, unless he made this a pretty successful trip, stops of a week or two at hotels like the Vandoria were rather expensive luxuries for them. No one, however, appreciated any more keenly than Roy Rousselle the importance of putting up a good front.

Elsie complained a little when she found that their room was on the first floor—which at the Vandoria means about a story and a half above ground.

"Only one they had vacant," explained Roy, who had done the registering; "and in one way I'm glad of it. The elevator service here isn't the best in the world, and I can run downstairs whenever I like, without waiting for the elevator. You'll find it quiet at night. The avenue isn't a heavy-traffic street, you know."

Rousselle toiled assiduously from the moment of their arrival in New York. He went at it early in the morning, and Elsie didn't see him again until six or seven in the evening. She, meanwhile, spent her days reveling in the sensuous delights of the great shops. In the evening they would go out for dinner to some French, Italian, or Russian restaurant—always a different place—partly in search of novelty, partly to avoid the expensive dining room of the hotel. It was only his fourth visit to New York, and her second; and they still found high adventure in all the delightfully varied possibilities of the metropolis. Roy reported that business was good, and seemed in high spirits.

They had been in the city a little more than a week when he came home one evening and said:

"Well, old lady, you might as well be looking around for that fur coat. I'm going to pull off a coup this week."

"About how much of a coat?" she asked, taking hold of his lapels and matching his whimsical smile as she looked up into his face.

"Oh, five hundred or a thousand dollars, I should say; or perhaps fifteen hundred, if you saw one you liked at that figure. You might even go as high as two thousand, if necessary."

"Roy!" she exclaimed, giving him a little shake. "How much do you really mean?"

"I said two thousand, top price," he replied, enjoying her amazement.

"My goodness, honey!" she exclaimed. "You must be cleaning up for sure! You don't really mean it? You do? How wonderful!" Then the joyous look faded slightly, and that little chilliness of the eyes and tightening around the mouth became visible. "Look here, my dear," she said, more soberly. "You aren't getting mixed up in anything rough again?"

Well might she ask that! Her married life had been punctuated with such anxieties. When she married Roy Rousselle in her home city in the South, nearly eight years before, it had been the opinion of her friends, not to say of herself, that considering the fact that she was a portionless orphan, with no near kinspeople, and not even distant relatives who loved her, she had been fortunate in providing for her future.

Drifting down there from Chicago when he was no more than eighteen, in his early twenties, Roy had risen to a good position in the financial department of a life insurance company, which had its home office in Mechanicsport. He was quick, good-natured, ingratiating, and eager to learn, and was said to have a fine head for business. He was regarded as a young man who was sure to get on. He bought an automobile and some handsome furnishings for their apartment, picked up a bond or a few shares of stock now and then, and he and his wife lived rather well.

But about three years after their marriage there was a suppressed scandal in the office of the insurance company. No word of it got into the papers. Roy had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances in the city, and among these there were many apologists for him.

"Just thoughtless"—"a little too young for such a job"—"carelessness, with no intent to be criminal"—these were samples of the excuses that were made for him.

He was forced to give up his moderate priced automobile and some of his stock certificates to square the matter. One of the two or three stock and bond brokers in the city promptly gave him a position as salesman, and in a short time he had bought another car and was prospering again, the only detriment to his progress being his occasional tendency to invest in highly speculative stocks. Two years later, however, when a mix-up, as Roy euphemistically called it, occurred over his hypothecation of some bonds belonging to a rich client, his employer announced that they had better part company.

By this time Roy was feeling keenly the urge to go into business for himself; and it is not to be wondered at that his preference was for something in the promotion line. He had studied the needs of a city not far distant which was persistently disappointing its Chamber of Commerce and its Rotary Club by failing to grow as rapidly as they predicted it would. Rousselle was convinced, he told the civic bodies, that the town would be greatly benefited by a series of truck lines connecting it with smaller county seats in the vicinity, and thus virtually placing it in complete command of the business of the surrounding territory.

Undoubtedly the scheme had its merits. Perhaps the fault lay in the youth and the eager and reckless methods of the promoter. True, he was not always overnice in his scruples, either; but even that handicap has not prevented many a promoter from achieving great success.

It may seem incredible, but Roy was aided by recommendations which he had been able to procure from prominent people in Mechanicsport. By pledging contracts that he had made in advance, also certain stocks—some of which were afterward declared to be worthless—and by getting personal indorsements from some local enthusiasts, he had managed to borrow twelve thousand dollars from one bank and nine thousand from another before the crash came, and the project vanished in smoke. It was true that he himself sustained some loss, though not as much as he claimed in his defense; but his handling of the affair had caused much criticism, and there were mutterings of crookedness. The local State's attorney looked into the matter, but found that he could do nothing; and so the affair passed into history.

Elsie still had some jewelry and a little bank account of her own back at Mechanicsport, to say nothing of a small safe-deposit box full of something or other, so they were not quite stony broke; and after some searching for a job, Roy went back to selling stocks and bonds again.

Elsie's girlhood among kinspeople who had little more than a casual interest in her had not tended to make her sensibilities more delicate; but she was frightfully upset when the first catastrophe of her married life—that of the insurance company—occurred. She wept intermittently in secret, though keeping up a proud front in public. She had already learned that her husband was full of wise little tricks and subterfuges, but they had mostly seemed rather clever and funny, and she had never dreamed that he would do anything radically dishonest. She insisted upon believing his statement, and that of his friends, that he had been merely careless, and had fully intended to replace the money.

But when the next episode—that of the other man's bonds—came on, like the second frost of autumn, it bit a little deeper into her spirit, and left her eyes just a thought colder in their blue. It was then that she had the first dim premonition of what lay before her—a hint which was confirmed by the episode of the truck line promotion. True, there was no embezzlement, no blatant fraud, in that affair—that is, nothing which justice, discouraged by the slipperiness of American law procedure, thought it worth while to attack; but there was an atmosphere of chicane over it all—empty bombast, flattery, evasion, concealment, misrepresentation, sugar-coated cheating.

By this time Elsie was becoming accustomed to these things, and even played speaking parts in the farce whenever necessary. Roy assured her, and sometimes it seemed to be true, that competition is so merciless nowadays that the only way to get on is to be a little sharper than the other fellow. Her husband still was the perfect lover, still held her fancy captive by his personal charm and by his manifest love for her; and, imperfect though he was in some other ways, he was all she had.

But she was afraid for him. She saw that these slips of his were those of a climber actuated by a fury of desire to reach the top. She saw that though a quick, ingen-

ious brain was functioning behind that sometimes elfin and sometimes keenly businesslike countenance, its judgments were often swayed, occasionally toppled over, by a feverish, breathless ambition—or, to speak more conscientiously, a lust for money and power. Small wonder that she was perturbed when he spoke of a "coup" which would yield the price of a two-thousand-dollar fur coat!

II

ELSIE'S blunt question offended Roy a little, but as usual he recovered his equanimity quickly.

"Nothing of the sort!" he declared. "Absolutely clean work is my specialty. As a matter of fact, I've never done anything worse than other men are doing every day. As the matter stands now, I've made some good sales since we got in, and I'm just about to put over a big one, with Heilmach's assistance—one that'll net me a nice little chunk of coin. It looks as if this visit to New York is going to be the hit of our career!"

These assurances, and her anticipatory joy in the possession of the finest fur coat she had ever owned, simply crowded out of Elsie's mind any suspicions which might otherwise have tormented her; and she spent the day in a delicious agony of choosing one from among many adorable garments in the shops.

Roy came home that evening with his mind much occupied by business affairs.

"I want to go to Boston the day after to-morrow, if I can," said he. "There's a big man there I want to see before he goes to Europe and spends all his spare change. By the way, got that coat selected?"

"Oh, yes, there are two darlings at Sonnenheim's," she replied. "You know that's a reliable old house, and not quite so high-priced as some others. There's one coat in particular—a mink—that I'm just crazy for."

"What's the price?"

"Two thousand," Elsie said in a faint voice, affecting timidity, and actually a little frightened by the sound of the figures.

"Trust you to go the limit!" he said, laughing and pinching her cheeks.

"Truly, Roy, is it possible that you can afford such a dreadfully expensive thing?"

"Sure! It'll take a good slice of our ready cash, but what of that? There's always more coming. The point is, I'm just

on the eve of doing big things, girly, and it'll be a help to my business to have you looking like a million dollars; and that's saying nothing of the fact that I want you always to have the best that our money'll afford."

Next morning, when Roy went out to breakfast, he took his brief case with him, saying that he had a very busy day before him.

"Suppose you wait till afternoon to buy that coat," he suggested to Elsie, who sometimes omitted breakfast, and who was now sitting up in bed, reading the morning paper. "If you'll be here at twelve o'clock sharp, I'll call you and tell you when I can join you."

At noon he called, naming Sonnenheim's, at 2.15 P.M., as the rendezvous. When he greeted her at the appointed time, at the threshold of the fur department, he remarked casually:

"I haven't got the money yet, but I'll have it within the next hour and a half or two hours. Let's go and look at the coat."

Elsie was inured to relying upon the expectation of funds to be clutched out of thin air at the last possible moment of grace, and it did not worry her as it might have another woman. Of course, it did not trouble her husband at all.

Roy was dressed that day in the best of everything he had, and it must be admitted that his taste in clothes was above criticism. The textiles in which he was attired were of the finest weaves, the most skillfully selected arrangement of pastel colorings, and the most conscientious tailoring, so that they fitted his slender figure with glove-like precision; and it cannot be denied that he wore them with an air. There were spats over his patent leather shoes, and immaculate gray suede gloves on his hands. He seemed almost too resplendent for a business man—rather like a hereditary millionaire or society favorite who condescended to dally with business for the fun of the thing.

As he looked over the coat that Elsie had chosen, he assumed his most aristocratic air and a distinct Southern accent. He was carrying out a rule that he had often propounded to her—that you must put on a lot of dog if you wanted to get service at these big stores. Elsie herself had naturally a slight Southern softness of tongue which complemented his dialect most effectively.

The coat was, indeed, a woman's dream—dark, silken mink, made thick and soft by New England winters—so soft that it was almost impalpable to the touch, yet sparkling like millions of tiny live wires. It was lined with a rich, changeable tan and red silk, with godets of luscious brocade velvet let into it around the bottom, even the stitching around the edges of these bits being triumphs of art.

It was no secret that Altorf's, the fashionable place across the street, would ask no less than thirty-five hundred for exactly such a coat; yet Rousselle patronized it. Without even hinting such a thing in words, he subtly conveyed the impression that he doubted whether it was good enough for his wife, and that her penny-pinching economy alone was responsible for her choosing one so cheap.

"Very well, deah, if that's youah choice," he at length assented, without emotion. "Very pretty, indeed!"

Elsie knew that he was masquerading, and expected no more enthusiastic encomiums until they were in the privacy of their room, when he would doubtless assure her that it was a "wow" and a "knockout."

"Can you deliver the coat to the Vandoria this afternoon, C. O. D.?" he asked in his languid Louisiana drawl.

The saleslady cringed before him as she faltered:

"Oh, I'm afraid not C. O. D.—not so expensive an article as this!"

"Of course I would pay a deposit on it," he explained gently. "Ah—may I see your—what do you call him?—department manager?"

That functionary was called, and Rousselle gracefully presented his card, reminding the tradesman that his family's name was "rahtheh well known in New Orleans"—which name he pronounced in ultra-Southern style, as nearly as possible all in one syllable.

Considering the fact that Roy had previously admitted a Chicago origin, and had never before ventured to claim kinship with the New Orleans Rousselles, this was rather good. Elsie recalled that there had even been knockers in Mechanicsport who asserted that his family's name in Chicago was not Rousselle at all, but just plain Russell.

As he had frequently told Elsie, the "fine old Southern aristocracy" stuff could always be counted on to knock a New

Yorker cold, and now he proved it. The department manager gratefully accepted the two hundred dollars in cash which Mr. Rousselle tendered him, and almost begged that payment of the balance should be deferred until delivery of the coat.

"I am going down town to my broker's office to get the money," said Mr. Rousselle. "Let me see—it is twenty minutes to three; I can be at the hotel by four o'clock, or a quarter after. Send the coat up after that time, if you please."

"Certainly, sir," said the manager, bowing graciously.

"We could never have got it sent C. O. D. if it hadn't been for the beautiful Southern scenery," whispered Roy to Elsie, his eyes brimming with mischief and pride in his achievement.

Elsie went back to the hotel and waited anxiously. At twenty minutes past three the phone rang. Roy was calling.

"Listen, Elsie," said he. "I'm just starting uptown with Heimach. We're to meet the man who's going to pay me the money right there at the hotel."

"My goodness, haven't you got that money yet?" she demanded.

"No, but the deal's practically closed, and—"

"Do you mean to tell me," she broke in, "that you haven't even made the sale?"

"Well, it's not quite completed, but it's all set, honey. Just a few final words—a mere formality—and the money's in my hands. This fellow Bristow, the customer, wanted Heimach and me to come uptown, so I arranged to meet him at the hotel. I'll try to steer them into a corner of that inner parlor—you know." He described the room. "There are fewer chairs and fewer loafers in there, and we can be more private. It'll only take us a few minutes, I think, to finish the job, anyhow; but I'm going to stay with those fellows till we separate. I don't want to leave them together, even after the deal's closed. Something might be said—you know what I mean."

She didn't, but no matter.

"If I don't bring the money up before the boy comes with the coat," continued Roy, "just send him down to me—no, that's right, he won't know me, of course. Tell you what you do—he can leave the coat, and you come down with him, and I'll give you the money. I'll be watching for you. You just hover in the offing and

give me a signal, and I'll step aside and hand you the coin; and—oh, yes, wait a minute, honey! I wish you'd run down right away to that public stenographer's, just to the left of the office, and get that contract in duplicate that she's written for me. It was to be done this afternoon, and I think she usually leaves about four o'clock. The price is to be seventy-five cents. You won't forget? Got to go now—Heimach waiting. 'By!"

III

ELSIE hung up the receiver with something of a slam, and went down to the stenographer's office with a brow furrowed with anxiety and vexation. The old, old uncertainty—which to Roy was always a certainty! Always counting positively on the theory that by the time he desired to do a particular thing the funds with which to do it would be dug up somewhere, somehow.

She was forced to admit that at times he displayed a positive genius for making the desired thing happen. Time and again the very filmiest cobweb of hope had by his magic been hardened to a steel cable of certainty; but in between these triumphs there were occasions when the strand had broken, and had dashed their hopes to the ground pretty heavily.

Trying to hearten herself by thinking only of her husband's successes, Elsie took up a magazine when she returned to the room. Minutes raced by. Half past four arrived, and neither Roy nor the coat had appeared. Five o'clock, and still nothing happened. Of course a store never delivers anything as quickly as promised or hoped for; but wasn't the deal downstairs taking much longer than expected to reach a consummation?

This eternal teetering on a razor edge of uncertainty, with pure disappointment on the one side and a never entirely unalloyed satisfaction on the other, had persisted in Elsie's experience until she had become somewhat hardened to it; but now, with a two-thousand-dollar mink coat almost at her finger tips, it made her distinctly nervous. She couldn't remember what she was reading, from one line to the next.

At ten minutes past five there came a knock on the door, and she rushed to open it. There stood the uniformed messenger from Sonnenheim's—not a boy, but a dis-

couraged-looking, middle-aged man with graying hair, who was evidently considered more trustworthy with considerable amounts of cash than a youth would be. He carried a large paper box.

"Mrs. Rousselle?"

"Yes. You have my coat? Come in!"

The man entered.

"Just lay it on the bed," said Elsie.

Her first joyous impulse was to open the box and see the coat. She bent over it, and began picking at the knot of the heavy cord. At that moment the man remarked casually:

"C. O. D. eighteen hundred."

Already anxious about the money, that brief phrase sounded in Elsie's sensitive ears as if he were urging payment.

"I'll have to step downstairs and get the money from my husband," she said.

She hesitated. Should she leave the man in the room? No, he was a stranger; better take him with her.

"You can just leave the box on the bed," she suggested. "I'll lock the door, of course. My husband is in a conference down on the lower floor, and he'll have the money ready for you."

How humiliating it would be if he didn't!

She picked up her key from the dresser, and made sure that the door was ready to lock. After they had stepped outside she closed the door and tried the lock, the messenger looking on meanwhile. She remembered that distinctly afterward.

Downstairs, she looked in the parlor where Roy had thought he would be—in all corners of it; but he was not visible. Followed by the man from Sonnenheim's, she traversed other parlors, corridors, the writing room, the main lobby, parlors and corridors again, around and around and around.

The street floor of the Vandoria is a rambling, indescribable maze; people have been known to become completely lost in it, and to beg for some one to lead them to the blessed light of day once more. Elsie threaded the labyrinth two or three times, then summoned the bell captain and asked that Roy be paged. An immature youth promptly went striding through the maze again, chanting in a mournful nasal treble:

"Call for 'Str'selle! Call for 'Str'selle!"

He returned in a few minutes and admitted himself baffled.

The delivery man was beginning to show signs of impatience. Where her husband had gone, or why, Elsie's whirling brain could not even faintly conjecture. Roy's life was full of these mysteries—unexplained and perhaps not always explainable things.

Had the closing of the deal proven so tough a job that the contestants had found it necessary to shift their base of operations? And had Roy been so absorbed therein that his wife and her affairs had been forgotten or neglected? Or had the deal fallen through entirely, and had he, unable to produce the money, sneaked off and left her to face the scorn of the tradesmen alone?

Either surmise left her furious. She was determined now that he must buy that coat or explain in person to Sonnenheim's why he couldn't buy it.

"Can't you wait just a few minutes longer?" she asked of the messenger. "My husband must have just stepped out for a moment. He's sure to show up directly, I know."

"It's past closing time now, lady," the man reminded her. "I ought to be getting back. Only thing I see now is for you to get it in the mornin'."

"Oh, dear, I wanted to wear that coat to-night!" she lamented.

"I don't see how I can wait any longer," said the messenger. "They won't like it if I do; and besides, I got a long way to go to get home, lady."

"Oh, well, if there's no other way!" sighed Elsie. "But tell them," she added, with a slight hardening of her tone, "that either Mr. Rousselle or I will come for the coat first thing in the morning."

Privately she registered a vow that if the coat had to be refused, the one who broke the news and begged for a refund of the two hundred dollars would be none other than Roy.

"I'll have 'em put it in the 'will call' room," said the man. "It'll be right there waitin' for you. Store opens at nine."

They went upstairs, and Elsie's eyes dwelt yearningly, almost mistily, on the package, as the man callously seized it and hurried away with it. Left alone, she tried to read again, but she was too much vexed to concentrate her mind upon the page.

Minutes passed, and still Roy neither came nor telephoned. She began to be worried by his silence. Perhaps something

had happened to him. It must be nearly six o'clock.

She rose and walked to the dresser, to look at her watch. It should have been alongside the pincushion. She always laid it on the dresser when she wasn't wearing it; but it wasn't there! Absently, she felt her left wrist, and then opened both small upper drawers of the dresser. Not there!

Could she have put it in her bag? She had never done such a thing; and then she awoke to a startling realization that her bag, which she usually tossed on the dresser top, was gone, too—and so was her delicate chain bracelet!

IV

At that a touch of panic seized her. She rummaged hurriedly in all the drawers of the dresser, and then through her trunk—which was ridiculous, of course. She would never have taken the trouble to stow her hand bag and jewelry away in a trunk. They were gone! They had been stolen; and, furthermore, they must have been stolen while she was downstairs. They were on the dresser just before that, she was sure. At least, the watch was, for she had looked at it not one minute before the Sonnenheim delivery man rapped on the door.

The delivery man! Could it be that he had picked them up? But that seemed impossible. It was true that the dresser and the bed were equidistant from the door, one on each side of the room; but she could have sworn that the man was under her eye practically all the time.

When she stooped over to untie the knot of the package, could he have stepped to the dresser and picked up the things? That seemed out of the question. She remembered that he was standing close beside her when he remarked:

"C. O. D. eighteen hundred."

She had bent over the package for less than five seconds. She hadn't even begun to get the hard knot untied; but she had heard that some of these thieves were nothing short of being magicians.

How long had she and the man been absent from the room? Possibly fifteen minutes; certainly not as much as twenty. If the thief came from outside, how did he get into the room? She remembered testing the door to see if it was locked. Somebody must have another key. Perhaps it was one of the employees of the house.

Good Heaven, how fortunate that the crook had not picked up that paper box lying on the bed! What a fool he would feel if he were to learn that he had overlooked a chance to get a two-thousand-dollar fur coat!

In spite of her woe at her loss, all this logic clicked through Elsie's mind like a movie film running through a projector—she was a quick-thinking young person in a pinch—during the minute that she stood frowning and biting her trembling lip in the center of the room. Then she hurried to the phone and reported the matter to the office, almost tearfully.

There had been about forty dollars in her bag, and the wrist watch—of platinum, set with tiny diamonds—was, next to her large diamond ring, her most valuable possession. It was a gift from Roy, and he had once admitted that it cost two hundred dollars. The bracelet, too, was no insignificant trifle.

The house detective came up, and she related the circumstances to him. She expressed no suspicion of the delivery man, but rather eliminated him from the possibilities; and in her slightly peevish desire to wreak her vexation on the nearest object, she intimated that the theft looked to her like an inside job. This the detective promptly branded as impossible, owing to the proven and undoubted integrity of the entire staff of the Vandoria; and he in turn expressed strong suspicion of the man from Sonnenheim's.

Elsie combated this theory, pointing out how difficult it would have been for the messenger to get the trinkets, and adding that he was a highly respectable looking man—at which Detective Donohoe gave a scornful laugh.

"Sonnenheim's seemed to think him trustworthy enough to deliver a two-thousand-dollar coat and bring back eighteen hundred in cash, anyhow," she concluded.

"Nobody in the world so careless as some of these New York business men," the detective countered. "Wall Street brokers will pick up a bird they never heard of before in their lives, put a uniform cap on him, and send him right out with fifty thousand dollars' worth of bonds in his hands. Then, if they never see him again, they howl about the crime wave and poor police protection."

Just then the telephone rang. Answering it, Elsie heard Roy's voice. The pres-

ence of a stranger saved him from getting a rather torrid exhortation.

"Where in the world have you been?" demanded his wife, with difficulty holding her voice to a tone of mild vexation.

"I'm awfully sorry, honey, but I had a deuce of a time landing that chap Bristow. Finally we all had to come over to his lawyer's office, on Forty-Fifth Street, before we could cinch the deal; but I've got his check in my pocket right now for ten thousand dollars, and a nice little chunk of it's mine."

"Well, I wish you had let me know before you left the hotel. I ran around downstairs fifteen or twenty minutes looking for you, and meanwhile our room was robbed."

"What? Robbed?"

She gave him the details.

"I'll be right over," said Roy, and rang off. The detective left soon afterward, promising immediate investigation of the matter.

V

FIFTEEN minutes later Roy came into the room, waving a strip of dull green paper—the ten-thousand-dollar check from Bristow—evidently with intent to assuage Elsie's grouch against him. Apparently the robbery had already fallen in importance to a minor position in his mind; but he humbled himself abjectly for having left her in ignorance.

As she told her story, he became intensely interested in speculations regarding the theft. He was of the opinion that in spite of Elsie's arguments against it, the delivery man might very easily have been the criminal; but he recalled another suspicious circumstance, and, after telling her of it, he hurried down to report it to Detective Donohoe.

"Just before I started down town this morning," he told the detective, "I went downstairs to get a magazine that my wife wanted—she wasn't going out to breakfast. You know, our room is back toward the end of a corridor, and after leaving the elevator you turn a corner to reach it. When I came back upstairs, I turned that corner suddenly, walking fast, and saw a man standing right in front of the door of my room, facing toward it. His head was bent forward, as if he were listening to see if anybody was in the room. He was some distance from me, but I'm confident that it was my room. Of course, walking

fast and making no noise on that thick carpet, I sort of surprised him. He didn't give a glance in my direction that I could see, but turned and walked away along the hall and went into a room on the other side from mine. As I unlocked my door, I noticed that his room was the third along the hall from the one opposite mine. The thing looked a little queer at the moment, but I thought he'd just happened to stop there, trying to remember something he'd forgotten, as a fellow often does, you know. Now it occurs to me that he might have been listening to see if we were in the room or not."

"What sort of looking man was he?"

"Well, he was about medium height, slender and athletic-looking, and a natty dresser—had on a tweed suit, I guess it was, sort of bluish-brownish, as nearly as I can remember, and a light felt hat with the brim turned down on the side next to me. That shaded his face, but I could see that it was lean and sharp-looking—oh, yes, and clean shaven. Those are the only impressions I got in my glimpse of him under the hall lights. They aren't very bright, you know."

The detective had drawn forth a plan of the first floor.

"Let's see—third door from the one opposite your room would be No. 137. Humph!"

A new thought seemed to strike him. He lifted the receiver of his telephone and conferred with the office for a moment.

"Just as I thought," he said, replacing the receiver. "That's a room that has been under repair. Been unoccupied for three or four days. A pipe burst in the wall and the room flooded—lot of plaster came off the wall on one side. The plumbing had to be replaced, and then new plaster and paper were put on and the place was cleaned up. To-day the room was kept vacant, to give it a chance to dry out. They intended to begin using it again to-morrow. That bird probably had a false key to that room, and he was making it his headquarters this afternoon, looking for a chance to rob somebody. Of course, he'd got a key to your room, too. These hotel thieves make a specialty of that sort of thing, you know. Let's go up and glance into No. 137."

They went up, Donohoe unlocked the door, and Roy followed him in. The room had no furnishings, not even a rug. They

looked all around, scrutinized the bathroom, and found nothing; but as they were starting out, the detective's eye fell on something to the left of the door.

"Hello, what's that?" he exclaimed, and stopped to pick it up.

It looked like a tiny, very thin book, little more than an inch square, bound in soft, dark red leather.

"Why, that's my wife's postage stamp holder!" exclaimed Roy. "She carried it in her bag all the time."

"H-m!" said Donohoe. "Seems he came back in here to look the things over. Must have stood right inside the door while he did it, and he dropped this little thing without noticing it, or perhaps threw it away. Well, that looks as if your thief hid right here, Mr. Rousselle. I know two or three fellows who do jobs like this, and I'll have them looked up right away."

The fright and irritation caused by the loss of her valuables made Elsie a little difficult to deal with in the matter of being left in the lurch by her husband; but he apologized contritely, promising to go down to the store with her next morning and do all the explaining, and she gradually thawed into a tolerable good humor.

"It's out of the downy for us bright and early to-morrow morning," said Roy, as they were retiring. "I spent so much time on that Bristow deal to-day that I neglected some other matters, and I want to clean them up to-morrow. Guess we'd better stick around here another day or two, and see if the police won't find your watch and things."

They rose early and breakfasted hurriedly at half past eight. Roy rose from the table first.

"You go on down to the store when you've finished eating," said he. "Meanwhile I'll step around to the bank and turn in this check. It's just around the corner, and Heimach is to meet me there and identify me. I'll send a draft to headquarters, take out my share in cash and meet you at the store in"—he glanced at his watch—"say thirty or forty minutes from now. Oh, I forgot! Poor child, you haven't any watch. You'll just have to keep an eye on the public clocks. I'll be at the store at twenty-five past nine, or surely by half past. It won't take me any longer than that."

Elsie finished her meal in leisurely fashion and strolled over to Sonnenheim's. She

glanced at a clock—twenty-two minutes after nine. Roy would be here almost any time now. She took the elevator to the third floor and strolled through the fur department. In answer to an inquiry she said:

"My husband is to meet me here. I'm just looking for him."

Two or three minutes passed, and it occurred to her that she might as well have the coat brought out. She was yearning to touch its cloudlike softness with her finger tips, and to see her mirrored image swathed in its shimmering folds. She explained the matter to the saleswoman who had served her the day before, and asked that the coat should be brought from the "will call" section.

"My husband will be here any moment now with the cash to pay for it," she explained confidently.

The woman tripped away at a good speed, anxious to oblige an aristocratic customer. Elsie strolled to and fro, glancing condescendingly at cheaper fur garments that were on display.

It seemed to take a long time to get anything from the "will call" room. Awful lot of red tape about these big stores! And why didn't Roy show up? Could it be possible that another hitch had occurred in his arrangements?

She saw her saleswoman in the distance, hurrying, almost running across the room. In a moment the girl hurried back, accompanied by the department manager. What was their flurry about? Elsie wished they would attend to her order, instead of tearing around on some other matter.

There was another interval of waiting. Then she saw Roy approaching from the direction of the elevator. She noticed that his face wore a very serious expression; but she had no time to wonder over this, for just then the saleswoman and the department manager approached her from the other direction. They were accompanied by a stocky man who wore a hat, while behind them walked a girl carrying a paper box.

"Elsie—" Roy began.

But just then the department manager broke in. There was suppressed excitement in his tone.

"Madam," said he, "a very strange thing has happened." He beckoned the girl forward. "When we opened the box just now—the box in which the mink coat

was sent up to your hotel last evening—we found nothing in it but this."

He pointed dramatically to the box. The two-thousand-dollar mink coat had vanished. Somehow it had metamorphosed itself into a man's overcoat of rough gray cloth somewhat the worse for wear!

VI

For a full minute the group stood staring at the box and at one another. The eyes of the Rousselles were fixed amazedly upon the poor, shabby substitute. The department manager and the man with him watched their faces. Presently Roy raised his eyes and faced the department manager. Astonishment and contempt strove together in his countenance.

"Is it possible?" he ejaculated, his drawl heightening the scorn in his tone. "Do you mean to tell me that when that box came back here last night, you didn't open it? You allowed a two-thousand-dollar coat to remain in it overnight?"

The official exhibited a slight trace of embarrassment.

"It came back after closing time, I am informed," was his explanation, "when most of the force had gone for the day and others were going. It was put in the 'will call' room. Many valuable goods are always being kept there. It was—it should be just as safe there as anywhere in the store."

"Evidently it wasn't," returned Rousselle cuttingly. "If this is a sample of New York alertness and efficiency, then I am disappointed. I think we would have been a little more wide-awake, even in the South."

The other man, who may as well be introduced as the store's chief detective, Britton, now remarked:

"I think we'd better step up to Mr. Kessel's office. He's the manager," he explained to the Rousselles.

They went up. Mr. Kessel, looking very solemn, ordered his secretary from the room, and she went, but Elsie did not think she closed the door tightly behind her.

"Now, I'm told," said Detective Britton with an owl look, "that this coat was left in your room at the Vandoria for half an hour or so."

Elsie spoke up at once.

"Oh, no—not more than fifteen minutes, and the door was locked. Your man saw me lock it."

"Did the Vandoria detective consult you regarding the theft of my wife's money and jewelry?" asked Roy.

"Yes," growled Britton. "Tried to lay it onto our delivery man; but that's ridiculous. That fellow Clegg has been in our employ for years, and we know him like a book. Straight as a string! He wouldn't steal a bread crumb off the pigeons in Madison Square. I sent for him as soon as the Vandoria man complained to me, but he's out on a delivery. Ought to be here any minute now."

"It's only fair to say," remarked Rousselle, "that there are other suspicions as to the theft of my wife's things."

He described the incident of the mysterious stranger in the hall, and it created a good impression.

"Donohoe took pains not to tell me that," said Britton. "He spent all his time accusing our man; but it looks queer to me that a thief would spend time changing those coats and wrapping when Clegg and the lady was liable to come back any moment and catch him at it. Why didn't he just grab the package and beat it?"

"Perhaps because he didn't want the theft to be discovered so quickly," suggested Rousselle. "It gave him more time to get away. He's also succeeded in making it uncertain who is the thief. No one can say now whether it was he or some person in your employ."

"Or even somebody else," added Britton, staring hard at Roy.

Elsie had already scented the menace in the atmosphere, and her heart skipped a beat at this remark; but Roy appeared not to comprehend it, and looked inquiringly at the detective.

"Just to get all the facts in the case, Mr. Rousselle," said Britton, "where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"After leaving here, I was in conference most of the time with a broker, and—see here!" exclaimed Roy, suddenly rising to his feet in all his outraged Southern dignity. "Do I understand that you are suggesting that I—we—had anything to do with this crime?"

"Don't get offended, Mr. Rousselle," urged Mr. Kessel, fearing to affront a customer, and pricked by the big merchant's ever present nervousness over possible damage suits. "Mr. Britton doesn't mean any harm. He's just trying to get all the facts, so we can have the whole case be-

fore us. No offense intended. If Clegg was on trial, say, and you were one of the witnesses, the lawyers would ask you questions like this. You see, we've lost a two-thousand-dollar coat, and it's pretty serious for us. Mr. Britton is a little blunt, but I assure you we don't mean any offense."

Roy recovered his composure after a moment, and said:

"Well, perhaps you're right; but I'm not accustomed to this sort of thing, and it rather gets on my nerves. When it comes to that, I have no assurance that your people found this old overcoat in the package that came up to the hotel. I haven't any means of knowing that they even opened the right box. How do I know that your man Clegg, or some one in your—what do you call it—'will call' department didn't steal this coat?" He moved the coat gingerly with his finger tips. "Did you notice that label?" he asked. "That coat was bought in your store."

"Well, what does that prove?" asked the detective.

"Maybe it doesn't quite prove anything, but your own employees are apt to buy their clothes here, because of the ten per cent discount they get. Now, you're asking me where I was in the afternoon. Do you know the firm of Heimach & Harris, stock and bond brokers, at 32 Pine Street? Mr. Heimach will tell you who I am, and also that he and I were together yesterday afternoon at the time when your man took the coat up to the hotel. Whether that was when it was stolen is another question." He drew forth his card case. "As my honesty seems to be in question, here is my business card. The firm of brokers with which I am connected is one of the most prominent in New Orleans. You may ask them about me."

Manager Kessel protested his full confidence in Mr. Rousselle, but Detective Britton stubbornly insisted on asking a few more questions.

"The only formality that remains now, I believe," said Roy at length, "is for you to refund the two-hundred-dollar deposit I made on the coat."

"That will be returned in due season," replied the manager smoothly. "The matter will have to go through the regular channels."

"I see no reason why it should not be returned now," retorted Rousselle. "I don't like your attitude, Mr. Kessel."

"You wouldn't care to let it apply on the purchase of another coat?" hinted the manager.

"No, I don't feel in the humor to buy anything more from this concern," was the reply.

"Well, we'll attend to it as soon as possible," hedged Mr. Kessel.

"If I do not find a check from you in my mail to-morrow morning," said Rousselle, rising to his feet, "I shall consult an attorney at once."

Like two aliens in a hostile country, the Rousselles spoke not a word to each other until they had passed through the doors of Sonnenheim's to the spacious pavement. Then—

"Phew!" sighed Roy, shedding his high patrician manner and his Southern accent. "That was certainly a devil of a mess!"

"Oh, wasn't it terrible?" Elsie was pale and almost faint. "But you certainly showed them up, honey. Oh, dear, I'm just sick about losing that coat!"

"And not only that—here's the worst of it, Elsie. It's just as well the thing happened as it did. It let us get out of the coat deal with dignity."

"What do you mean?" cried his wife.

"I didn't get any money on that big check this morning. Bristow had phoned the bank to stop it."

"Gosh!" said Elsie helplessly. "Could anything more happen to us to-day?"

"Well, the hotel might burn down with us in it," suggested Roy, with a flash of the whimsicality that was never absent long.

"What did he stop the check for?"

"Decided overnight that the stock had been misrepresented to him somehow—that's what Heimach said. I'm going to try to find out more about it to-day."

They parted at the corner.

"Go on back to the hotel and lie down and rest your nerves, girly," said Roy. "Cheer up! That wasn't the only wad of money in the world." His wiry spirit was springing back to an upright position again. "I've made some other good sales this trip. Bound to have setbacks like this once in awhile."

VII

MR. HEIMACH's testimony upheld Roy's alibi, but nothing more was heard from Sonnenheim's. There was no check from them in the mail next morning, and Roy made good his threat by employing a clever

attorney whom Heimach recommended, and who promptly wrote the merchants a brusque letter.

A disquieting incident occurred that night. Roy and Elsie went out to dinner, and then to one of the big movie houses on Broadway. Upon their return, about eleven, they were undressing, when Elsie, who was putting her things away, said:

"Roy, have you been pawing around in my dresser drawer?"

"Great Scott, no!"

"Well, somebody has been prowling. Things aren't arranged just like they were." She stood up and bent an indignant gaze upon him. "I wonder if some thief has been here again—probably one of the servants!"

"Oh, I guess not," he replied guardedly.

She noticed a peculiar expression on his face, and suddenly light struck in upon her.

"Roy! Do you think our room has been searched?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," he admitted.

Her anger almost choked her.

"Why, how would they dare? Just as if we were common pickpockets! The fools! Even if we'd stolen the coat, do they suppose we'd be silly enough to hide it in a dresser drawer?"

"Maybe not, but they thought they might discover something else incriminating. They're trying to find out all they can about us, you see."

"Well, I won't stand for it!" she raged.

"Why don't you report this to the office at once? See your lawyer and have him sue the hotel, and sue Sonnenheim's, too. It's an outrage!"

"Hold your horses, old girl," he advised.

"It's too late at night to do anything now, but I'll certainly hand the manager a few well chosen words to-morrow morning, and then we'll cut the Vandoria out of our route for the future. We'll be leaving to-morrow, anyhow, to go over to Boston. If they catch the fellow who stole your things, and need us, we can come back."

Roy's attorney recovered the two hundred dollars from Sonnenheim's next morning, and retained a goodly share of it as his fee. Hearing no news of the stolen trinkets, the Rousselles shook the dust of the Vandoria from their soles and journeyed to Boston. There Elsie bought a very pretty cloth, fur trimmed winter coat, Roy assuring her that the mink—or possibly sable—garment was a certainty for next season.

"Well, I'll not buy another one on futures," said Elsie. "The money 'll have to be in the bank, and a good margin besides, before I look at fur!"

At Boston, for the first time, she became acquainted with the terrible sensation of being watched. She met a certain man frequently in the hotel corridors, or in the lobby, and thought that more than once she saw him regarding her attentively. She learned from a bell boy that the man was the hotel detective.

One day she saw him talking confidentially to another man, and that evening, while she and Roy were lounging in the mezzanine, she discovered a person whom she believed to have been the detective's companion sitting in a chair near them—actually within earshot. She grew nervous, and fancied time and again that their effects had been searched. Roy laughed at her, declaring that her suspicions were exaggerated; but she knew that he, too, was a little uneasy.

At Buffalo he asserted that the surveillance had ceased, and, in truth, Elsie could lay her finger upon no definite circumstance indicating such scrutiny. Sonnenheim's and the New York police must have decided that they were innocent; but Elsie did not really breathe freely again until after they had reached Cleveland unmolested.

It was there, one morning, that Roy called her up from the hotel office just as he was starting out for the day, and said that he had found a letter at the desk from Goodman, the New York attorney, who had been left to take charge of her valuables in case they were recovered. Goodman said that the watch and the bracelet had been found in a pawnshop, and that he was sending them on by mail. The bag, most likely, would never be recovered.

"Oh, well, it was an old one, anyhow," said Elsie. "Did they catch the thief?"

"Not yet, he says."

The package containing the watch and bracelet arrived later that day, and Elsie began to feel normal again.

They reached Pittsburgh just before the holidays, and prepared to spend some time there, as Roy said that business in his line would be quiet for at least two weeks. Among the acquaintances whom he had made on a previous visit, and whom Elsie met from time to time, was a man whom Roy introduced as "my friend Sam Gartner. You've heard me mention him."

Elsie didn't remember that she had, but her husband's casual assumption that she knew all about Sam was no uncommon occurrence.

Gartner was a trimly groomed but somewhat overfed individual, with the scrubbed, pinkish appearance of the high liver who does the best he can to keep himself in condition by artificial rather than rational means. His lips were full and red, and his eyes were rather too prominent and greedy for pulchritude. They dwelt lingeringly on Elsie during a dinner which he ate with the Rousselles one evening, and he interspersed his rendition of such wise and witty cracks as were in general circulation at the moment with numerous pointed compliments to her.

"Well, I s'pose you're going to give the little lady a jolly Christmas, eh?" said he to Roy.

"Sure, I'll treat her right," agreed Roy. "Christmas is a special occasion in our family—a day of good will. I never lick her on Christmas Day."

Sam laughed heartily at that, asked if Roy had selected her Christmas gift, said that he must put her down on his candy list, and finally announced that he had decided to throw a party at the hotel on Christmas Eve, to which the Rousselles would, of course, be invited.

"What is this man Gartner's business?" asked Elsie of Roy, after the guest had departed.

"Well, he's got money invested in various things here and there, but his principal business at present is high-class bootlegging. He's not known in it, though, even by most of his customers. Very prominent man about town, Sam is. He knows everybody."

VIII

CHRISTMAS EVE came, and Sam was as good as his word. He told the Rousselles that he had invited four or five other congenial people; that they would first go to a show, and then watch Christmas come in at a supper which would be rendered appetizing by some of the finest old pre-war stuff obtainable in either America or Europe. Elsie had bought a new evening dress for the occasion, but, though she said nothing about it to Roy, she inwardly bemoaned the lack of a handsome fur wrap with which to complete an imposing ensemble.

She had been out with Roy most of that afternoon, watching the holiday crowds, dropping into a movie show, looking into store windows, and trying hard to forget the little ache in her heart at seeing so many, many people happy because homes and loved ones awaited them only a few minutes away, all bursting with Christmas secrets which would be joyously revealed within the next few hours.

If Roy felt any such pangs as these, he gave no sign of it. He sparkled with effervescent spirits as they went home—home, indeed!—to the hotel at dusk. The air was growing much colder—bitterly cold.

"Need some heavy wraps to-night," said Roy, glancing at his wife. "Too bad we haven't the good old mink coat for you to wear now!"

"Oh, gee, I wish we had!" sighed Elsie.

Up in their room Roy potted about nervously, looking at Elsie now and then, drumming on the table, picking up a newspaper and laying it down. Finally he cleared his throat and said:

"Honey, we're going to be out with some swell dressers to-night, I expect. I believe I'll give you your Christmas present right now, so that you can wear it to the party."

He opened his wardrobe trunk and brought out a large paper box, which had been standing on end inside. Laying the box on the bed—while Elsie sat looking on, wide-eyed—he removed the lid and lifted out a fur coat—a soft, dark, shimmering mink.

Elsie gave a gasp of astonishment and pleasure, and half rose from her chair. Then some inner spring seemed to fail, and she sank back again, gazing at the coat. Roy spread it across her lap and the arms of the chair.

"You liked the one you selected in New York so well," said he, "that I tried to get another one as near like it as possible."

She did not speak, but sat turning the coat this way and that, examining it with intense consternation. The lining was different, and the label sewed into it was that of a Pittsburgh department store, but in every other respect the coat seemed to be identical with the one she had chosen at Sonnenheim's. Elsie studied the border, where the tails of the animal had been set in to produce a darker tone. She even appeared to examine the seams.

"You succeeded," she said at last, in a dry, hard voice. "You must have a

wonderful memory to be able to get such a perfect duplicate of the other coat. In fact, some folks might be inclined to say it was the same coat."

"Oh, but how could that be?" protested her husband, his eyes twinkling.

"I guess you can explain that better than any one else," she replied, leaning back with folded arms, and looking up at him.

At that he burst into a shout of laughter—essentially an ebullition of gratified boyish vanity at the successful working of a prank.

"Couldn't fool Little Bright Eyes!" he cackled; but presently his mirth dwindled away, chilled by the frozen look of the woman who sat regarding him across the glistening folds of the costly fur.

"Now listen, Roy!" she began in a low, tense tone which rapidly grew higher. "I've stood for some pretty shady stuff since we've been married, but this is the limit, and more than the limit. I've got sort of used to your being a little too smooth for the other fellow in a business deal, but I swear I'm not going to stand for grand larceny!"

"Not so loud, honey!" cautioned her husband. "Remember, we're in a hotel room."

"High finance seems to be excusable, if you can get a good lawyer," she raged on, without bating her tone, "but they put you in the pen for plain stealing!"

"Oh, shucks! No, they don't," said Roy. "You can fix that as easy as anything in the whole catalogue—with a little money and influence. Maybe you don't know that I know Bill McQuithy, one of the biggest East Side politicians in New York."

"Stealing and bribing!" grated his wife, her contemptuous gaze roving over his face. "How did you—oh, I suppose this was one of those coups you were talking about!"

Roy giggled again, pridefully.

"Coup is right! Honest, now, deary, you've got to hand it to me. I fooled them completely. They watched us awhile after we left New York. I was sure they would; but they've given it up long ago."

"Embezzler and thief!" muttered Elsie. "Good Lord, what am I up against?"

A spot of color came into her husband's cheeks at this, and it faded slowly.

"Don't get so raw, old girl," he said, after a moment's silence. "Picking up that little two-thousand-dollar trifle isn't a circumstance to steals that are pulled off every

day, and by perfectly respectable people, too. Many a big business man steals enough in a forenoon to buy his wife a house full of coats like this."

"I dare say you're right," admitted Elsie; "but this is a great deal coarser. Ask any policeman if it isn't. Those fellows can buy their way out of trouble, if necessary. You're a pretty small fish to be taking a chance on anything like this."

"The point is," boasted Roy, "that I made the scheme so air-tight that I wasn't taking much of a chance."

"Not much of a chance?" sneered Elsie. "Just a little chance of getting your wife into jail with you! And you told me probably dozens of lies and frightened me and humiliated me. My God, boy, are you crazy? How do you expect me ever to believe anything you tell me again? How can you have any love for me, when you treat me like this?"

"Now, listen, honey," pleaded Roy. "I really did this mostly for the fun of the thing."

"Fun!" gasped his wife. "Fun!"

"Adventure, you know, and—and experiment. It was like working out a problem in chess. I'd read of two crooks, a man and a woman, who got a fur coat away from a store, but they did it in such a way that it was known they got it, and they had to vanish to save themselves. Of course, being professionals, they had counted on that. I said to myself, why wouldn't it be lot cuter to snag the coat in such a way that no one would know who got it? I'm always working out problems of some kind in my mind—the more complicated the better. I worked this one out and fixed up two or three alternative actions for every step in the process. I hadn't intended actually putting it into practice, at first. It was just mental exercise; but, somehow, when we were at Philadelphia, I sort of involuntarily wrote a telegram to the Vandoria, telling them to reserve me a room on the first floor. I had thought of that tangled up street floor of the Vandoria as a good place for such a job, and the first floor room was part of my scheme. I told the clerk, when I registered, that my wife never liked to be far above ground. Then I—but I reckon you don't care to hear how I worked it out."

"Oh, go on!" said his wife, with bitter sarcasm. "Crime is always interesting, whether you approve of it or not."

"Even after we got to the Vandoria,"

continued Roy, "I wasn't certain that I was going to do it; but all the time I took pains not to be seen much around the hotel, or to make any calls for service, so neither bell boys nor anybody else knew me. I knew it was no use to ask you in on the deal, so I had a double job—to fool you, as well as Sonnenheim's. Of course, I didn't have any conference with anybody that afternoon, and didn't get any ten-thousand-dollar check from anybody. The check I waved at you that night was a fake. When I called up and told you I was on my way uptown with Heimach, I was in reality in a phone booth downstairs. I had bought an overcoat at a secondhand clothing store—it didn't take much search to find one with Sonnenheim's name inside it—and I had it inside my own overcoat over my arm.

"When you came down in the elevator to go to the public stenographer's—those contracts I had written were unnecessary, by the way—I was standing in a nook near by, watching, and I slipped up the stairs and to our room. Remember that high shelf in our closet? You couldn't see up on it when you were standing on the floor. Well, I swung myself and the two overcoats up on that shelf, and was lying there all the time you were waiting for the delivery man. When he came, you and he did just what I expected you would. It was the natural thing to do. If he had insisted on carrying the coat downstairs with him, or staying in the room with it, my plan would have flopped right there. As soon as you and he went out, I dropped down from the shelf and changed the coats, wrapping the fur in a sheet of stout wrapping paper I'd brought with me. I also put your money and jewelry in my pockets."

Elsie uttered an involuntary exclamation.

"The whole job didn't take me five minutes," Roy went on. "I wrapped the fur coat in as tight and flat a package as I could, put my overcoat over my arm again, and carried the package under it. Here was where I took my biggest chance. If I'd met you and the messenger in that upper corridor, I'd have had to take another tack; but I had that all doped out, too. However, I had made the change so quickly that I was certain you and the man wouldn't be coming back before I could get down. I paused at the foot of the stairs for a moment, saw you away up at the other end of the lobby, and ducked out by the side door."

"I got a corrugated paper carton from a grocery, put the coat in it, and shipped it, insured, to Sam Gartner. I also wrote to him to hold the package till I called for it. Sam's used to all sorts of queer deals. Since I got here, I've had the changes made in it, mostly for reasons of safety; and there you are."

"Suppose the store had opened the box when it was taken back that evening!" suggested Elsie.

"I had made some investigation into the subject, and I didn't believe they would if the box went back about closing time. Those birds aren't pining to do any more work than necessary. That's the reason why I specified a two-thousand-dollar coat for you. I was afraid that with a five-thousand-dollar one, they might be so cautious as to open the box that night."

His eyes sparkled with pride in his own astuteness.

"And even if they had opened the box," he went on, "there was the mysterious stranger I had seen in the hotel, who had stolen your valuables; he must have taken the coat, too. Of course, there wasn't any stranger. When I saw the workmen renovating that room, I knew that I had the last link necessary to put the thing over, and I told you to decide on your coat. Even then, I could have worked it in two other ways. As to that little stamp holder of yours that Donohoe found on the floor, of course, I dropped it as I followed him into the room. It was so light that it made practically no noise as it fell."

"I fixed Heimach that afternoon by telling him that I'd promised to buy you a fur coat, but that a woman I'd formerly been mixed up with had come to town, and that I'd have to see her that afternoon and buy her off. I told him the story I was going to tell you, and asked him to back me up in it—which he agreed to do. Heimach owed me a favor. I know two or three things on him, too. That sort of thing appeals to Heimach. He's a rounder, himself."

"Next morning, as soon as we left Sonnenheim's, I phoned Heimach and told him about the coat disappearing. I said that, of course, I knew nothing about it, but, as I had told my story to you, I'd have to stick to it, and I asked him to do the same. I figured that that store detective would go down to see him that day, and, sure enough, he did. Heimach's alibi for me settled the case in my favor, I think."

He paused for a moment, and then his roguish grin just touched his face.

"Own up now, old girl—wasn't it a darned clever piece of work?"

"Yes," said Elsie. "It was so darned clever that I wonder why you ever do anything honest!"

He looked at the floor, a little embarrassed, his fingers jingling the coins in his trousers pocket.

"To tell the truth," said he, "I was a little afraid you might look at it this way; but you stood by me in those other jams, so I thought that perhaps you—you wouldn't mind this so much."

"Yes," said Elsie, satirically. "Because I stood for a little cheating, you thought I'd stand for common thievery. Next thing you'll be asking me to stand for murder!"

"Honest truth, Elsie, I only did it to prove that I could put it over. It was like pulling off a trick play in football, you know, or a bit of strategy with an army. I don't have to steal fur coats," he boasted, springing up and striding to and fro as his restless ambition began to goad him again. "I can make money enough to buy 'em—finer and finer ones every year. Just watch me, child! It won't be long till we'll buy you a ten-thousand-dollar sable and never feel the strain."

"I'll wait till we can get it decently," she retorted; "as decently as is possible among financiers." She couldn't resist that little *banderilla*. "In the meantime"—she tossed the coat upon the bed—"I'll never put this one on again. I'm going to send it back to Sonnenheim's."

"Oh, the devil!" he grumbled, suddenly stopping his walk at the window. He stood staring down at the street, twisting the curtain cord between his fingers. "You're not going to send it in your own name!" he said, and the sentence was something like a command.

"No—anonymously."

"They'll find out where it came from, anyway."

"Maybe not; and if the coat is returned still brand-new, I think they'll be glad to drop the matter and ask no more questions."

Roy's brow slowly relaxed.

"Oh, well!" said he, the corners of his mouth twitching upward again. "I had the fun of putting the thing across. That's something!" He turned and took her

hands in his, where they lay cold and passive. "Forgive me, honey," he pleaded, "and we'll go out day after to-morrow, just as soon as the stores open, and buy you a fur coat—honestly buy it. We can spend five hundred on it, anyhow. We pay the cash down on the nail. Will you do that and forget this?"

"Roy, I can't forget it," she replied steadily. "I don't want either of us to forget it; and there's something else that you must not forget. It isn't so important for me to have a fur coat as it is for you to remember that the next time you do anything really crooked, you and I will part company—forever. I may have grown a little callous to sharp practice, but I certainly have no fancy to be known as the wife of a convict."

As Roy stood staring at his wife, her bitter humor suddenly melted, her self-control gave way.

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" she cried, clutching his coat and looking up into his face through trickling tears. "For God's sake, don't go on like this! Don't wreck both of our lives! Think of the setbacks you've had, and why. Your career has hardly begun yet; please, for my sake, keep

it straight! You're clever enough to prosper and make money honestly. Why be a common thief?"

His face paled under the final barbed phrase, but he took Elsie in his arms, kissed her, and strove to soothe her as only he could.

"I'll never do it again, honey," he urged. "I swear I won't! Please don't cry. It was only a sort of a—a joke, just to see if I could. I won't do it again. There, there, girly! Let's bathe your face now and get dressed. We don't want to be late for the play."

Mentally, at that moment, he was in sackcloth and ashes; but a little later, as they left the room to go downstairs, uplifted by his new resolves, he was humming an air, and his eye had almost recovered its wonted sparkle. All evening, as they sat at the play and at supper, Elsie furtively watched his changeable, faunlike face, with its dark, vivacious eyes darting keen glances this way and that in search of novelty, adventure, conquest; and a question, naked and brutal, tore relentlessly at her heart:

"I wonder how long I'll be able to keep him out of prison?"

THE CREEK

He made me just a little creek,
And bade me greater waters seek;

"Go straight and swift, my child," He said,
"Until you reach the river's bed,

"Then with that stronger current blend,
And press on to the sea—the end."

I might arrive there in a day,
If I should never stop to play;

But there are lovely flowers about,
And so—I wander in and out;

I laugh and idle in the sun,
And seldom deeply, swiftly run.

And do you think that He will frown
Upon me, when He glances down?

Or will He modify His mind,
And smile a little, as I wind,

Knowing that some few drops of me
Must surely, sometimes, find His sea?

Mella Russell McCallum

The Princess on the Tower

THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF THE TRESPASSER, THE SAFE CRACKER, AND THE LADY OF THE PALACE ON THE ROOF

By Gertrude Pahlow

CHRISTABEL straightened her hat, which the impact of a fellow subway farer had knocked galley-west, took a long breath, and plunged through the mob on the platform for the stairs. Up these she struggled, being nearly bowled over at the top by a stout descending man who failed to see her over his *embonpoint*. Reaching the street, she was engulfed in a clash and clang and clamor that would have terrified a medieval warrior used to the simple shock of steel on steel in the battlefield; for this was New York at the evening rush hour, and Christabel was going home.

She threaded her way through the subway-bound mob, cannoning off a projecting suit case into the arms of a shiny gentleman who returned her with such force that she nearly knocked the pins from under an anæmic stenographer, and won at last to the door of a huge office building that reared a head as lofty as the Tower of Babel up into the smoke. Here she met a new detachment of shock troops tumbling into the *mêlée*; for everybody else was going home, and everybody was in a hurry to get there.

She wormed up the steps between the ribs of money magnates, nearly lost an eye to an impetuous office boy's elbow, and crossed the lobby in face of a volley of typists. At last she reached the row of elevators, waited until her own particular car had disgorged its load, and slipped into it with a sigh of satisfaction, the only ascending passenger among all those down-going hundreds.

"Evenin'," said the elevator boy, with a welcoming grin. "I see you're back, as the feller said."

"Yes, getting home, Louis," replied Christabel happily.

"You look awful pleased about it," remarked the youth enviously. "I'll make her zing, an' getcha there quick."

Christabel thanked him with a smile; and he proceeded to make her zing like a rocket, like a meteor, up through the vast reaches of the soaring building, past floors and floors and empty floors, thirty stories into the air. At the thirty-second floor they stopped abruptly. The ascenders' vital organs, which gave an odd sensation of having preceded them a little, settled back with a flop into their accustomed haunts, the iron grille of the cage opened, and Christabel escaped.

"Good night, Louis!" she said. "Keep the secret!"

"Anybody gets that secret out o' me 'll pry it from between my dead slats!" grinned Louis. "Good night, miss!"

Christabel sped around a corner, along a narrow corridor, up a short flight of stairs, and through a door. Then she stopped short with a little, low cry of sheer content, for she was at home.

All the floor of the world stretched out before her—the shimmering water floor, set with islands, strewn with ships, streamered with banners of smoke flung out to the far horizon. Behind and below her the gigantic ant hill of the city teemed, but she did not look at that; she was an ant all day herself, and had enough of ants. Instead, her eyes traveled happily to the little brown bungalow with the little green grass plot from which, all night, she ruled over the far-spread world.

Locking the door by which she had entered on her kingdom, she went on into her little brown palace—with eyes nearly closed, for she never liked to claim it as her own until she had made herself worthy. In her bedroom she took off and hung out of sight the sober secretarial garments that disguised her all day, and in her low white bath, more spotless and elegant than the marble pools of queens in other days, she washed

away the last vestige of the city's touch. Then she dressed herself in silken garments and a gown of blue shot with silver, and bound her shining hair with a blue velvet fillet; and then, an ant no longer, she could open her eyes and claim her kingdom.

Her living room was gray, with autumn-bright rugs and a jewel-bright picture or two. One wall of it was a great window, wide like an open heart to all the wonder of the world. Christabel stood watching the smoke-streamered ships weave back and forth over the shining water, and grim, green Liberty mysteriously beautiful in the slanting sunset light. What a window, what a kingdom, what a home! Could any sovereign lady ask for more?

II

It was a long, warm evening of late May, fit for dining out of doors. Christabel began her preparations, moving leisurely. All day she snapped into it and snapped out of it, all night she could let the golden moments drip through the wide peace like slow drops of honey.

Heat came, like magic, into the little white range at the click of a button, and she laid two succulent lamb chops on the broiler and shut them in. Out of the little white refrigerator she took pale green lettuce and quivering rosy aspic for a salad. There were brown-gold rolls and sweet cream-gold butter, and purple grapes in a bursting cluster. These things she laid carefully and delicately on her thin yellow china. Thus should a lady fare, exalted above the dingy world.

Out on the wide roof that was her terrace it was very still. The city rumbled far below, the steam whistles zoomed far away on the water; but as Christabel moved to and fro, setting her little table with fine napery and polished silver, she seemed the only moving creature on this high level. From the myriad rooms below even the scrub ladies had departed. The elevators that shot their comet courses up and down all day were still. Nothing stirred in the whole, huge, mouseless building, except occasionally the reposeful watchman on the ground floor.

Her roof was ten feet higher than any neighboring roof, and in all the months she had lived on it not even a cat had climbed so high. She loved her sense of inviolate seclusion. It was for this—for peace and spacious solitude, for release from

the jostle and bustle of her work day—that she had staked her all in one rash house-holding venture.

"All alone—I'm so all alone," she sang to herself, softly and rejoicingly.

Just as she voiced this reflection there came above the coping of her kingdom first a strong brown hand, then a smooth brown head, and then a tall, well knit body. They all belonged to the same person, a young and vigorous man. They flashed swiftly into her ken, they assembled concretely before her eyes, they smashed her precious solitude to smithereens with one defiant gesture.

At first she was too startled even to feel resentment. She stood and stared at him, speechless; but if she was startled, he was more so. He looked as if he had seen a ghost. Indeed, poised at first glimpse of her on the precarious edge of nowhere, it was only by a rather remarkable recovery that he stayed in the picture at all.

The two stood and gazed at each other, alone on the far-away tiptop of the world.

"Are you *Melisande*," asked the intruder in an awe-struck voice, "or *Isolde* on her castle turret, or only a lovely dream? How did you get that way?"

"How did *you* get that way?" returned Christabel severely, recapturing her poise as he had recaptured his. "I'm a respectable citizen confining herself to her own premises, but you're a trespasser."

"I'm more than that. 'Trespasser' doesn't describe me," said the young man earnestly, "any more adequately than 'respectable citizen' describes you. I'm a fugitive from sudden death. I fled up here, by way of the fire escape, to get away from a band of murderous criminals."

Christabel looked at him with cold incredulity in her eyes.

"You seem to have been successful," she said. "I don't see any criminals hanging to your coat tails. Since you've accomplished your purpose, there's nothing to detain you."

"I suppose not," he answered ruefully. "Walk, not run, to the nearest exit. Will you direct me to it?"

"It's over there, behind the chimneys; but the elevators have stopped, and you'll find it rather a business to walk down thirty-two flights of stairs."

"That's easier than shinnying down thirty-two bony fire escapes on the wall of a cañon."

She shivered as she visualized the danger. "I should think so, indeed! You didn't really come up that way?"

"Only two flights of it. I work on the thirtieth floor. To-day I stayed after hours—for a purpose—and these crooks blocked my retreat by the door, so I got out of the window. I was on my way downstairs, you see, when I got distracted, looking at you."

He was certainly doing it thoroughly, now that he was at it. He gazed upon Christabel, his gray eyes widening and deepening in half incredulous wonder and delight. She, on her part, could not help doing a little gazing, too. He was one of the few men she had seen who could bear such a background. Silhouetted against the sunset and the wide world, he stood lean and clean, poised and adequate, and yet with a wistful hunger about him that was strangely and strongly appealing.

Christabel felt disturbed. She resented his intrusion, of course; but her tight-armed daylight personality was gone from her at this time and place, and her unguarded nighttime self seemed soft and pliant. She feared she was not as hotly resentful as she ought to be.

"Well, since you've done it, you may as well go on," she said aloofly. "I'll show you the way."

She walked with dignity past the great stack of chimneys and down the roof to the postern gate that gave access to her kingdom; but no more had she put out her hand to turn the key than she drew it back, and turned a startled face to him.

"There's some one there!" she whispered. "Some one's trying to open the door!"

"Great Scott!" he answered in an electric undertone. "They're after me! Then it's the fire escape, after all. Good-by, princess!"

He turned away, and began to walk toward the jumping-off place. To her own surprise, Christabel found her heart beating rapidly in protest. He had told the truth, he *was* in danger. Even if he had been one of the criminals himself, she didn't want him killed in cold blood. She hurried after him.

"Not down there!" she cried sharply. "To go down that little, flimsy skeleton, from a height like this—why, it would be suicide!"

"To meet the person on the other side of that door would be more so. Any of that

gang would drop a man as soon as look at him. Is there any other way off this roof garden?"

"No way at all. It's lots higher than the others. You can't jump."

He stopped, considering. After a moment he turned to her with an effect of surrender.

"Then I'm at your mercy, princess. Look here, I'm going to tell you the whole story. I'm confidential secretary to George Owens, the great electrical engineer down below. He made an invention, and engaged a mechanical expert to work out the details for him; and now the expert's trying to steal it. He can't get along without a certain formula, and that's kept in the safe down there in the office. This morning I saw that somebody had been monkeying with the lock, so I decided to stay after everybody was gone and put the papers in another place. Just as I got them out, I discovered these safe crackers outside the door, and I knew mighty well they'd crack me, too, if they found me there; so I took to the fire escape. If I go back the way I came, I'll fall. If I go down the stairs, they'll get me. Princess, will you hide me?"

Christabel looked at him. He appeared very tall and capable as he leaned eagerly toward her, and she was a rather small and slender bulwark of defense; but the pleading in his face was not to be resisted.

"Yes, I'll hide you," she answered slowly. "Come inside."

He followed her into the little house, through the gray living room and into the blue and ivory bedroom. Here everything stood in lovely order, serene and virginal, unspotted from the world. Christabel pressed a button in the ivory paneling, and a section of the wall swung open, showing dainty garments hung in rows, emitting a faint breath of perfume.

"You may go in there," she said.

He hung back. The sight of her blue *peignoir* and little blue satin slippers seemed to daunt him.

"I—I don't quite like to," he demurred.

His shyness increased Christabel's resolve to shelter him. She gave him a gentle but firm shove inside.

"Don't be silly," she commanded. "It's better to be smothered than dynamited. I'll call you as soon as it's safe outside."

Closing the door upon him, she went back to the narrow grass plot and wide tinsward that made her park. Outwardly

serene, inwardly very tense, she busied herself about the table again, and waited for something to happen.

She had not long to wait. In less than two minutes there were light, stealthy steps behind her, and she turned to see another intruder emerging, slowly and cautiously, from the shelter of the chimney.

This was quite a different breed of intruder from the last one. He was a small-statured, unshaven individual, with a swarthiness of complexion partly natural and partly acquired. His eyes were darting and shifty, his raiment without benefit of cleaner; but in one respect he resembled the other completely—at sight of Christabel, straying blue and silver on her battlements, he jumped so violently that he nearly lost his balance, and had to steady himself by clutching at the chimney with dirty finger nails.

This gave Christabel a marked advantage, and she was not slow to seize it. She did not move or speak, but stood and looked at him as a sovereign lady on a tower should look at an intruding worm, in cold, disdainful surprise; and before he had recovered from his shock of astonishment she had him well under subjection. Even his tongue, which obviously was not trained to genteel usages, was chastened.

"Lady," he inquired, swallowing convulsively, "have youse seen a guy makin' a get-away from here?"

"No," replied Christabel coldly.

"Been around long yourself?"

She raised her eyebrows with delicate hauteur.

"I live here," she said.

"Then if any guy did try to do a fade, youse 'd sure see him?" pressed her visitor.

"Certainly," returned Christabel. Slipping the inquisition neatly on to the other foot, she added: "And what are *you* doing here, if I may ask?"

Her quiet, queenly superiority seemed to have sapped his assurance completely. Licking his lips, he mumbled:

"Lookin' fer a crooked guy."

"Then," said Christabel disdainfully, "you're looking in the wrong place. There are no crooked guys here, with possibly one exception. I shall be greatly obliged if you will remove yourself from my private premises. If you don't feel like going alone, the watchman will be delighted to help you."

The grimy man was galvanized into in-

stant activity, evidently only too anxious to oblige.

"I'm on me way—on me way," he exclaimed hastily. "Sorry to disarrange ya, lady. So long!"

Without more formality, he scuttled off around the great chimney stack and disappeared down the stairway.

Christabel followed, closed the door securely behind him, picked up the key—which his expert ministrations from inside had poked out—and turned it sidewise in the lock.

"There's one alien enemy expunged," she remarked to herself. "Now I'll go and eliminate the other one!"

III

BUT when she had let the gray-eyed man out of the closet, to eliminate him at once seemed somehow a little brusque and drastic. He emerged with such eager trustfulness, he had been so intimately infolded in her raiment for the last few minutes, that he seemed less an enemy alien than some one with a sort of claim on her.

"The man's gone," she told him, "but I think it would be safer if you waited a few minutes. He may be lurking in the neighborhood still."

"Exactly what I was thinking," her refugee answered eagerly. "There are three of these fellows, all deep-dyed criminals. They won't leave until they've had a go at the safe, and when they find that the papers are gone they'll want a go at me. They saw me; they know I'm somewhere about. This is unquestionably the only place for me at present."

"Perhaps—perhaps you'd dine with me," said Christabel—shyly, for she had never shared the hospitality of her castle in the air with any one. "There are two chops."

"Oh! Perhaps I would, if you'd ask me!" he exclaimed, with an almost religious fervor.

She led the way to the little white kitchen. The chops were sizzling juicily on their grill, nearly done. She took out more salad, put more rolls into the oven to toast, and, with a reckless gesture of hospitality, made coffee in the little shiny percolator, though it meant that there would be no cream for breakfast.

The young man stood entranced, gazing at her and her preparations with fascinated eyes.

"All this—and coffee, too!" he said rev-

erently. "I didn't know earth had anything to show so fair. I didn't even expect so much of heaven. Let me take out the chops; you'll burn your fingers."

She let him; for, although she had cooked her breakfast and dinner every day since she entered upon her kingdom, without burning her fingers once, she needed no book of etiquette to tell her that princesses must be served when feasible. He carried the fresh viands out to the table on the tinsward, and soon they were facing each other across it.

The sun had almost finished setting now, and the restless boats wove their pattern on a sheen of shimmering rose and silver. Their smoke and steam drifted up in opalescent clouds, and mingled with the mist that seemed to fold the upper air in silence. Christabel and her visitor were alone in a realm that belonged entirely to them. There was a still enchantment on the hour. They could not eat with the enthusiasm which the quality of the nourishment merited. Their eyes kept straying, Christabel's to the iridescent world, and the young man's to Christabel.

"How long have you lived here, princess, in your ivory tower?" he asked her.

"Almost half a year."

"Almost half a year! Why didn't I know before?"

"How should you know? It's a very great secret."

"I should have known by telepathy. Two floors isn't far for such waves as you start to travel. I shouldn't have bothered you. I should only have thought beautiful thoughts to you, and learned to play on the lute or the dulcimer, and sent songs of praise floating up to you in the twilight. Alas, I can't sing!"

"Your thoughts can," said Christabel. Although she looked only at the view, more and more she was aware of the wistful, eager speech of the young man's eyes.

"Oh, yes, my thoughts can sing. What an understanding heart you have inside your royal robe! Ten hours a day I buzz around on that thirtieth floor, keeping track of my boss's business, and all the time my thoughts—the top layer of them, the unpractical cream—go singing out of the window on their own business, making poems, dreaming dreams. Now I see what it is that draws them."

"It's the harbor," said Christabel, carefully impersonal, "and the river, and the

ships going out to sea. They draw mine, too."

"Ah, yours don't need drawing; they live all the time on the misty mountain tops. You're a fairy tale princess. You—"

Abruptly Christabel broke in upon his dreamily ardent speech.

"Go inside, quick!" she whispered, laying an urgent hand on his across the little table. "Some one's coming up the fire escape. I saw his fingers reaching for the coping!"

The young man jumped to his feet, catching in his the hand with which she had warned him, and pulling her up, too.

"They did see me come up, then! I thought so. Princess, I'm a wayfarer at your castle gates, beset by brigands. Will you help me?"

His gray eyes, under level black brows, burned into hers with an intensity that made her heart flutter.

"Yes," she answered, a little breathlessly. "How?"

He took from his pocket a sealed envelope, thick with papers.

"Hide this. They'll search me, and if they find it on me they'll kill me; but if they lay a finger on you, I'll kill them. Hide yourself, too, princess."

"And hide you, too, wayfarer?"

"No, I won't hide again. With your royal protection I'll face them, like Horatius at the bridge. Run to your bower, princess—the barbarian hordes are at hand!"

He swung her swiftly inside the little house, flashing a smile at her, and took up his position of defense in the doorway. Slipping the packet of letters inside her frock, she stood back in the shadow and watched him with another little flutter of the heart. He was rather like a fairy tale prince himself, so vivid, so gay and debonair in the face of danger. Of course, it was annoying to have her treasured solitude so damaged, yet there was a certain thrill about the knock of adventure at the gates.

The dirty hand on the coping had now been followed by a dirty cap, a dirty face, and a dirty person; and the newcomer, stepping upon the roof and squinting about him with a lone but efficient eye, was not long in discovering the defender of the doorway. Leaning over the edge, he whistled unsanitarily on his dirty fingers, and then advanced a cautious step or two.

"Ah, you're dere, bo, are ya?" he inquired, in a laryngitic voice, whose hoarse-

ness somehow held an effect of menace. "I t'ought ya couldn't slide, wid all de gang on de watch. Don't move, now—hold de picture!"

He shot a rapid glance from his one eye over his shoulder, and jerked his head at a bow-legged individual, suggestive of the Neanderthal man's type of beauty, who was following him over the edge.

"C'mon, Joe," he added, advancing again. "We rung de right bell."

"Quite a party, isn't it?" commented young Horatius at the bridge, pleasantly.

"You said it, bo; but it ain't your party—it's ours. Stick up your dukes! We gotcha covered, an' we ain't shy. Put 'em up!"

"I'm damned if I will!" returned Horatius, folding his arms with amiable firmness.

"Wantcher stummick full o' bullets?" growled the Neanderthal man.

"Not especially, but I want my hands like this. You won't shoot, I feel sure. Perhaps you didn't know it, but I'm not alone here."

This information had a visible effect. "Safety first" was evidently the motto of the two new visitors. They came forward more slowly, and the leader proffered a change of subject.

"Gimme the papers," he suggested huskily, threateningly.

"Come and get them," encouraged Horatius, affably.

Christabel, who had been observing the interchange with deep interest, realized that it was now time for action on her part. She cast a rapid glance about for a hiding place; but the palace was small, and had been constructed without secret chambers. Moreover, every fiber of her revolted at the thought of those dirty hands pawing among her dainty privacies. She must hide the packet off the premises—in a hurry, too. Where? Rather a stiff problem, at a minute's notice; but they were coming, and he trusted her.

She had an inspiration. Catching up the pen from her desk, she ran into her bedroom, tucked up the blue and silver gown, and slipped out deftly through the window.

Both the invaders were now confronting Horatius at the door, evidently organizing a search party. Neither one saw her. She slipped behind the chimney stack and sped to the door of the stairway. Here, half frightened, half exhilarated, she paused to listen breathlessly for shots; but she heard

nothing, and after a moment she unlocked the door and ran down the stairs.

Arrived at the floor below, she scampered around a corner and down a corridor until she came to the shining mail chute, down which, like small shooting stars, letters dropped all day long to a safe, inviolable haven somewhere out of sight. She stopped long enough to scribble an address on the pregnant envelope, watched it slide swiftly down to where the glass plunged into the solid floor, and then turned, exultantly satisfied, to hurry back again.

IV

WHEN she reached the stairs, her heart jumped into her mouth. Creeping cautiously up, just ahead of her, was the grimy individual who had first trailed the young man into her ken. Evidently he had not given up the quest as easily as she had hoped. He had seen her come down, and was profiting by the open door. If he reached it first, and locked it against her, then who would stand at brave Horatius's hand, and keep the bridge with him?

Christabel was a young woman of resources, and at once she found another inspiration in her pocket.

"Oo-oo!" she screamed, on the sharpest note she could muster.

The grimy man jumped, toppled, and made a violent effort to save himself from falling backward down the stairs. As he stood frantically gesticulating, she slipped past him, gained the stair head, and closed the door behind her. Then she turned the key sidewise, so that he could not push it out.

"There's one that's not coming to the party!" she said triumphantly.

Horatius was still standing in the doorway, his arms folded, while the one-eyed man held a revolver against his ribs and the Neanderthal man went through his pockets with monkeylike deftness. As Christabel arrived, the search party appeared to become satisfied that the papers were not on his person, and at once transferred its attention to her. After the inevitable tribute of a moment's blank amazement, the one-eyed man indicated her to his companion with a movement of his expressive jaw.

"De lady," he said, "she's in cahoots wid de guy. Frisk her, Joe!"

At this suggestion the expression of detached interest fled from young Horatius's

face. His arms unfolded as if some one had touched a spring. With one rapid and well directed gesture he sent the Neanderthal man sprawling, and with another he snatched the revolver out of the one-eyed man's hand. Then, striding across the tin-sward to Christabel's side, he put his arm around her silver shoulders and confronted the enemy with flashing eyes and ready weapon.

"You touch this lady, you dirty vermin," he said, with great force and sincerity, "and I'll heave you over the edge of the roof!"

So determined was his expression, and so efficient his presentation of the revolver, that both the visitors seemed momentarily deprived of the power of repartee. Emboldened by the firm pressure of the arm about her shoulders, Christabel was moved to add to their discomfiture.

"If you're still fussing about that envelope," she said with cool scorn, "you may as well give it up. I addressed it to myself and put it down the mail chute, and you'll never see it again. If your friend is on your mind, you may just take him off; you won't get any help from him. He's locked in downstairs, and he's not going to get out—unless he runs into the watchman, and gets out into the police patrol!"

This seemed to damage the *savoir faire* of the visitors still further. They exchanged rapid glances. The one-eyed man blinked his one eye, the Neanderthal man wagged his prognathous jaw uneasily.

"Oh, that reminds me!" exclaimed young Horatius, pursuing the advantage in a fashion that was perhaps a trifle unchivalrous. "I hate to bother you, princess, but you see, I'm busy holding this gun in the right position, and if I move it's likely to go off and shoot these people. Would you mind going inside and calling up the police? There's a station just around the corner. I shouldn't wonder if they'd be here—"

There was a shuffle and a scramble, and two quick-moving forms detached themselves from the palace park and disappeared, with complete lack of ostentation, over the wall. Christabel and the young man looked about. They were entirely alone with each other and the sunset sky.

Christabel moved away from the sheltering arm, and drew a long and somewhat tremulous breath.

"How brave you are!" she said. "That was wonderful! I don't believe anybody

ever got rid of a whole band of criminals so quickly and quietly; and you weren't frightened one bit!"

"Oh, that was nothing," disclaimed young Horatius hastily; "but you—you're a perfect marvel. Talk about resourcefulness! Why, the way you disposed of those papers was a master stroke. I never would have thought of it. And talk about *courage*—Daniel in the lions' den was a slinking craven beside you. I never saw such a girl!"

"Bosh, I didn't do anything," disclaimed Christabel in her turn. "Come, let's finish our dinner!"

They turned back together to the little table. They had already dealt with the chops and salad, and set the plates aside; only the purple grapes remained, and the amber coffee, still hot in the little percolator. He drew his chair around beside hers, and they sat looking out at the paling world.

"The sunset's fading," murmured Christabel, turning to face it.

"Yes—twilight on the tower."

"I'm always very peaceful here at twilight. It's the loveliest hour of the day."

"It's the hour of truth, princess."

"I know it," said Christabel in a very small voice.

A silence fell. The two nibbled at the big ripe grapes and sipped at the coffee, and watched the ruddy water turn to purple-gray, and the lights of the boats, white and green and red, drawing chains of sparse-strung jewels across it.

Suddenly Christabel spoke, still in a small voice.

"You said this was the time for truth, and I'm going to tell it. I—I didn't need to go through those brave motions at all. I have a bell that calls the watchman. He can run an elevator as fast as Louis. He could be here in two minutes, and put anybody out in two more. I'm not a heroine—I'm a fraud. Now that you've heard the truth, you'll be wanting to go." She turned away. "Good night," she added, almost inaudibly.

He took a quick breath, made a quick step after her, and caught her hand.

"Wait! Princess, wait till you hear *me* tell the truth! I'm a hundred per cent bigger fraud than you. I telephoned the police before I ever climbed out of the window, telling 'em about the crime and the criminals and the place and everything; and they've got the whole gang safely garnered

in by now. I was just showing off all the time, you see."

Christabel turned to stare at him in amazement, drawing her hand away.

"Then—why did you come up here at all?" she asked.

"To see you. I've watched you go up and never come down every evening for a month, and for two weeks I've been coming back to the office afterward, waiting for an excuse to follow you. I could have hugged those crooks—even the one-eyed one. I never meant to be a nuisance, you know. I just meant to speak to you and go across your roof, down your stairs, and right back to the outer darkness."

"Then—why did you stay?"

"Oh, princess! I'd seen you!"

There was another pause. The young man looked, shamefaced but eager, at Christabel, and Christabel looked away at Liberty darkling in the shadow.

"I suppose," said the young man, breaking the constrained silence, "you will call the watchman and have me put out now."

Christabel did not answer. She was busy looking at the little stars beginning to gleam about Liberty's head.

"Princess," questioned the young man suddenly, "why didn't you call him when I first came?"

She still made no answer; but she took her eyes from Liberty and flashed them shyly, sidewise, toward him and back again.

"Princess," he demanded breathlessly, "did you want to hold—the adventure—too? Do you—want to hold it?"

She turned away from Liberty and looked straight up at him, her eyes mistily bright in the twilight.

"I think—I always knew," she answered in a very low voice, "that there was room for two on this tower!"

BALLADE OF LOVELIER LADIES

I USED to say: no face so fair
Is under heaven. For three years long
I did this constant faith declare
By deeds of love, in many a song;
Your name was honey on my tongue,
What sweeter word was there to say?
But I have seen—yes! I was wrong—
Three lovelier ladies in one day.

Where were my eyes for three long years
That idly viewed the siren throng,
Blind to their lilies and strange hair,
Bound to you by a love so strong,
As some poor captive thong on thong,
Nor let my eyes once go astray,
Because to you I did belong—
Three lovelier ladies in one day!

For you seemed so beyond compare,
A moon the little stars among.
All other women were not there;
No face from Paris to Hongkong
Could hold me as I passed along,
Nor storied face of queen or fay
In haunted books forever young—
Three lovelier ladies in one day!

ENVOI

Princess, my heart aches to prolong
This ballade of our love's decay,
With burden like a funeral gong—
Three lovelier ladies in one day.

Nicholas Breton

A House With Five Corners

JOE BUSH, EX-COAST GUARD SAILOR, FINDS THAT THE IRON OF DISCIPLINE IS IN HIS SOUL.

By Herman Howard Matteson

JOE BUSH, because he felt shame before the face of his fellow white men, studied the crazy, sprawling house from a distance.

If he could determine that this newly built igloo, or shanty, whatever one wished to call it, housed an Aleut, an Eskimo, or a Russian half caste, why, he would go in boldly, and demand food. If it were the home of a white, he would plod on, hungry and wretched, and claw his supper from the under sides of the beach rocks when the tide got low.

As outlandish as the hut appeared, he feared it was the dwelling place of a white man. To the rear stood several rows of fox pens, and a little storehouse upon the side of which hung a net for the taking of salmon. Not a sound issued from the place but the whimper of vixen foxes, and the louder yelp of a king.

Hunger gripped at Bush's vitals like the clutch of a cold hand. He stepped out from behind a bowlder, and advanced toward the door which stood partly open.

When still a dozen paces away, Joe noted that the hard-packed dirt threshold had been strewn with salt crystals. This, he knew, was the vengeance sign of the Aleut. If the death threat had been uttered against this new, misshapen house, that threat might have been executed.

Through the open door, there issued no sound of a human occupant. Anyhow, the shelves might hold tinned things that a man could eat; in the barrel might be flour, and bacon in the box.

Upon the salt-strewn threshold he paused. He thrust his head in with a caution to equal that of an Indian. The room was in semidarkness, lighted dully by such sun rays as were able to pierce the walrus stomach membrane that covered the sash.

Joe stepped into the room, fell back against the wall, and began stumbling his way toward the door.

Hunger brought him to a stop. What was a dead man when one's stomach growled warning that it would turn to and digest itself unless it were given food?

Sprawled gruesomely upon the top of a packing box against the wall was the figure of a giant white man with a red, tangled beard. The brutal lips, gray and puckered, snarled away from strong, yellow teeth. The skin beneath the beard was a fish-belly white.

Through the thick chest a seal spear had been driven. The head of the weapon had been buried to the haft in the larch logs. There the body hung, like that of a crucified thief.

Joe stood staring at this stark fulfillment of an Aleutian vow. Iron nerved as he was ordinarily he jumped and screamed, like a frightened child when a hand suddenly was laid upon his arm.

From a dark, far corner of the room, hitherto unobserved, an Aleutian girl had arisen and walked to him, her footfall noiseless in the skin mukluks that she wore. Her black eyes widened at sight of the white man. Smiling a bit, a plump little hand timorously touching his arm, she stood before him.

"I, Kushana," she announced. "I speak good white talk. I work one time in salmon cannery at Unimak. I speak good. Oh, I see you before!"

Joe Bush flushed violently. The girl was pointing to the brass buttons on the tattered tunic of what once had been the spick-and-span uniform coat of a petty officer of the United States Coast Guard.

As if to torture him, to remind him of his shame, she ran her hand down his sleeve,

and it came to a pause where a vivid, unfaded bit of the cloth bore the imprint of the eagle. That insignia of honorable service had been stripped from him when he had been drummed overside at Unimak.

"I see mans like you at Unimak," she continued. "You gold braid mans. Now I not afraid. You stay here with Kushana. I not afraid."

Joe bit his lip. The girl, unaware that he had been dishonorably discharged—"busted," as the service word has it—was claiming his protection against something. He turned his gaze toward the gross body pinned to the wall by a seal spear.

"You stay here. Then I not afraid," Kushana repeated.

"I'll stay—awhile," he promised. "Say, I'm hungry. I'd cargo more sand, and think clearer if I had a bite to eat. Any prog in the house?"

"I don't know. I look. I fix. Oh, yes! See?"

The girl opened a cupboard door. There were tinned things, a heel of bacon, a tin of coffee, and canned milk.

Kushana took a match from a box on the wall, and started the blaze in the sheet iron stove. Smiling occasionally at Joe, she deftly sliced some bacon, and put coffee in the pot.

"I kind of think grub would taste better," Joe suggested, jerking his thumb toward the body, "if I packed that out to the storehouse."

"Yes, sure." She bobbed her small head vigorously. "I not afraid now of Johnanson. I afraid before. Not now. But take out to storehouse."

Joe laid hold of the body. The slightest pull caved the chest in where the spear had pierced it. He drew his clasp knife, whittled the haft of the spear in two above the head, lifted the body, and bore it to the warehouse.

When he had disposed it decently upon some boxes, and covered it with a tarpaulin, he returned to the house. Kushana had spread a let-down table hinged to the wall, and poured the coffee.

Still smiling vacuously, she seated herself opposite him when he had nodded the invitation. For the first time he studied the plump little creature with particularity. Pretty, for all her flat face, decidedly pretty.

Her eyes were less slant than those of most Aleutian girls. She was clean. The

fawn skin parka, a smocklike garment that she wore, really fitted her, and had been fashioned with exquisite artistry of beading and needlework.

"I suppose the thanks for this grub we're owing to the party I just cargoed out to the storehouse," offered Joe, placing some slices of bacon on Kushana's plate.

"Oh, no," she corrected. "Me. This grub belong by me."

"You? Why, you didn't know for sure they was even any in the house. Give me the course, kid. I don't get you. Your grub?"

"I a widow. Johnanson, he my man. Then he go dead."

With this brief and not too lucid obituary, Kushana popped a bit of bacon between her red lips.

"Widow! Why, you hain't only a kid. How long you married to this—this party I cargoed out?"

Kushana held the tip of her brown finger on the table. "The sun here when I fetched here and marry Johnanson. The sun here, and Johnanson go dead."

She moved her finger the space of an inch. Kushana, Joe concluded, had been married and widowed within the space of ten minutes.

"Yes, Johnanson, he go dead," she repeated, half arising, and peering into Joe's cup to see if it needed replenishing. "Now, I glad you come here, gold braid man. I not afraid. You stay. Plenty more grub. Forty foxes in the pens, worth, oh, many money. You stay here. I not afraid when you stay here."

"Afraid! With him, that party dead and gone, what was they to be afraid of?"

She turned and pointed to the salt scattered upon the threshold, the Aleutian vengeance sign. "I afraid—of—Nigchik. But not now. You stay here."

Kushana leaned back, narrowed her eyelids and appraised the vast bulk of the former gold braid man. For a moment, her black eyes looked into his gray ones. She let them rest upon the disordered tangle of his abundant, reddish hair.

"Oh, no," she said, "with you, I not afraid of Nigchik."

"Better spread the chart, kid. I mean, wise me up, tell me what all the *pukpuk* is about." *Pukpuk* is the Northwestern Indian word for "trouble."

"Oh, Nigchik he buy me for wife. Johnanson, he take me away from Nigchik."

Then Nigchik make Johnanson go dead. That all."

Thus, briefly, Kushana related the epic of the deadly love triangle of the North.

Joe Bush sat staring out through the open door. Murder, as he gathered the facts, had been done over possession of this desirable Aleutian girl.

For the purpose of holding in check this primordial urge to kill, to punish swiftly and surely where blood had been shed, that was the business of the coast guard ship that plied the threatening shores of the far flung islands off the Alaskan coast. Training and discipline had left their marks upon Joe Bush.

His first instinct was to be quickly upon his way, to gather in this Nigchik, if he had murdered the white man, Johnanson, and to deliver him into the strong brig aboard the guard ship.

A sudden flush suffused his features. He was no longer of the guard. The captain, the "Old Man" of the ship, had stripped the two white crows from his sleeves, as the service men call the eagle, had drummed him over the side, and sent him forth in disgrace.

What was the coast guard, its ideals and purposes to him? Since he had become a wanderer, a beachcomber, a blanket stiff, why, he had better forget the coast guard, and see what personal and immediate advantage the situation might hold for Joe Bush.

"You say you was married to this Johnanson for a minute or two, and then Nigchik killed him?"

She nodded brightly. "Yes, Nigchik make Johnanson go dead."

"You're out and out the widow of this Johnanson then?"

"Yes, sure."

"This crazy house, the land, the pens, all them foxes belong to you then?"

"Yes, sure, I a widow. All that belonged to my mans, now belong to me. That is, all belongs to me till Nigchik brings back the bundle of fox skins. You got to stay here, gold braid mans, make Nigchik go away from here till after sundown. Then he cannot throw the fox skins back into Johnanson's igloo, and take me away. You know how Aleutian people do, big man?"

Joe shook his head dubiously. Rather frequently, the coast guard had been called in to adjust difficulties arising out of the

complicated Aleut custom of buying and bartering wives, and trading them back again.

This much he did understand. If an Aleut sold a wife to another, by custom, he might repudiate the bargain by returning the price of purchase and reclaiming his former wife, but he must do so before sunset of the day upon which the trade had been made.

"Looke now, kid," said Joe, "so I don't take a sheer on this wedding rumpus, you best spread your chart, and give me the whole course, port to port."

Kushana, stealing an apprehensive look now and then through the open igloo door, began to acquaint Joe with all the details of her barter and sale to Nigchik. Finally, when Kushana had mapped out the dilemma on the top of the let-down table with her pudgy forefinger, Joe grasped the essentials of the situation.

He began to grin, to peer into the dark corners of the igloo, and to nod his head in appreciation. This white man, Johnanson, although he paid with his life for his knavery had been a crafty scoundrel indeed.

Johnanson, it appeared, irked by the loneliness of his bleak fox island, had often besought the father of Kushana to sell him his daughter in marriage. The father, declaring that white men were cruel to native girls, refused. Nigchik, aware that Johnanson sought a wife, and possessing four of his own, had several times offered to sell the white man a wife.

"A man should have a wife for the corner of his house," Nigchik had said. "I sell you a wife for the corner of your house, for ten fox skins. I sell you two wives, for ten fox skins each."

Johnanson had demurred. The four wives of Nigchik, although good workers, and women who did not talk too much, were old. Johnanson desired a wife young and sprightly.

Nigchik, spying Kushana one day where she fished for salmon from a kayak, sought the girl's father. The offer of Nigchik, a mighty chieftain, of three sea otter skins for the girl was eagerly accepted.

The day was set upon which Nigchik was to fetch the sea otter pelts, invest Kushana in her wedding smock of doe skin, and take her away to his igloo. An Aleut boy, who sometimes fished for Johnanson to provide salmon for the hungry foxes, must have acquainted the white man with the

betrothal of Kushana to Nigchik. A day or so before Nigchik was to claim his purchased bride, Johnanson appeared at Nigchik's igloo.

"I am very lonesome," Johnanson said to Nigchik. "I need a woman for the corner of my house. Fact is, I have so much work, feeding the foxes, hunting in the rocks when they hide their dens, that I need two women—or three."

"I sell you good woman, two women," offered Nigchik, "or three, for ten fox skins each. A man should have a woman for the corner of his house."

Johnanson pondered. "I tell you what I will do, Nigchik," he said. "You have four wives. You're a Tyee, or chief, and can easy get lots more women. I will give you forty fox skins, and you swear to give me a wife for every corner of my house. Forty fox skins for a wife for every corner of my house. I bring the skins to-morrow, and you fetch me the women, a wife for every corner of my house."

Nigchik's little shoe button eyes gleamed. It was agreed. Sacredly, to bind the bargain, Nigchik and Johnanson shook hands, white man fashion. Further to bind the bargain, Aleut way, Nigchik broke the bone of the leg of a ptarmigan, gave half to Johnanson, and thrust the remaining half into his war bag. That ceremony made very sacred and binding the obligation to provide Johnanson a wife for all the corners of his house for forty fox skins.

Johnanson returned to his igloo. The second day following, just as Nigchik, with a retinue of Aleut canoe men was fetching Kushana, his newest bride, Johnanson appeared and flung down the bundle of fox skins.

"There's the fox pelts, Nigchik, forty—count 'em. Now, you'll fetch me a wife for every corner of my house."

Nigchik counted the skins, and grunted an order. As impassively as if they were only removing from one room to another, the four old, withered wives of Nigchik did up their pitiful bundles of worn Kamik boots, and filthy skin garments, and marched to the beach.

"You bring along this wife, too," ordered Johnanson, pointing to Kushana. Nigchik angrily protested, declaring that he reserved the right to designate what wives he had sold for the corners of the white man's igloo. Johnanson exhibited the broken ptarmigan bone, and forced the

Aleut chief to bring Kushana to the beach and embark her with the others in the big skin umiak.

"We come to this place here," said Kushana, waving her plump hand to include the igloo of Johnanson, the fox pens, the whole bleak island. Nigchik order four old wives to go into igloo, sit down one in each corner, for that was bargain.

"'Young wife she go in, too, and sit in a corner,' say Johnanson, and again he show the broken ptarmigan bone. Nigchik he look into igloo. He never say a word, but wave his hand for me to go in, too. Johnanson he play a smart trick. He tear out part of his old igloo, and build new, a house with five corners. It is a sacred bargain, a wife for every corner of his house. I walk in, and I sit in a corner, too, five of us, a wife for every corner for forty fox skins."

"Wise guy," Joe Bush remarked.

"Johnanson he laughs a lot," the girl continued. "He holds up the ptarmigan bone, and Nigchik nods his head. It is a sacred bargain."

"'Hey, Nigchik,' said Johnanson, 'you can have back the four old wives. Take 'em back to your igloo. This one, Kushana, I keep.'"

"The four old wives get up, walk out of the igloo. I sit in my corner. Johnanson laughs some more. Nigchik backs out of the igloo when the old wives have gone. He puts his hand in his war bag, and scatters salt on the threshold as he backs away. Nigchik picks up a seal spear that lays on the ground. No mans in the North throws a spear as Nigchik throws it. Just as Johnanson laughs one time more, the spear comes z-z-z! It strikes the breast of Johnanson. He choke. He gurgle. His head roll funny. He go dead, pinned to the wall like you dry a fish when the sun is hot."

Joe Bush sat cracking the joints of his thick fingers. Now he had the story. Moreover, he knew why Kushana so earnestly supplicated him to stay on, and be her man, the spouse of her choosing.

By the Aleut custom, Johnanson, by sacrificing the forty fox skins, could force Nigchik to take back the four old unwanted wives. Also, by the Aleut custom, Nigchik, by returning the purchase price, could reclaim Kushana if only he made restitution of the fox skins before the sun went down.

And the sun was dipping swiftly toward

the gray and somber west. Kushana arose and stood before Joe Bush, her black eyes eager and eloquent.

"Please," she said, twisting her head away in sudden embarrassment. "You stay here, gold braid man. I cook very good. I not bad, and make too much talk noise. I catch fish. I tend the foxes. I sew. I paddle a kayak. I sing one white man song call No Banana. You stay, gold braid man."

Bush stood looking over the shoulder of the little Aleut girl toward the setting sun. Why not, he was asking himself? The fox farm was worth easily ten thousand dollars. Kushana, he knew, would worship him like a slave.

Why not? Outcast, disgraced, broken he was already. Could the taking of a native woman lower him any deeper into the degradation that he had plumbed. Why not?

"You feel sure this Nigchik party will be warping in to fetch back the forty fox skins, to take you away?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "He come before sundown, and bring the fox skins. When he throws the fox skins in across the threshold, then, by the custom, he can take me back to his igloo to be his wife. He come now soon, big man. But I not afraid if you are here. You gold braid mans. You can make Nigchik go away until the sun is down. Then he dares not come. You stay, gold braid mans. Not just to-day," she added, diffidently, "but stay for always. I cook. I sew. I—"

Joe Bush arose, walked to the door, and stood above the salt of vengeance that Nigchik had strewn. Kushana followed, and put her hand timidly upon his thick arm. Joe turned his head and looked down at her.

"Don't you dast be afeered, kid," he said, grinning. "I'll just lay hove-to handy, and I guarantee I and this Nigchik go to a bight sudden if he tries to take you in tow. I—I got to do some thinking, kid. I'll be handy. Nigchik won't never get you. But I got to walk, to do some thinking."

He gave her a reassuring grin, and started across the open toward the fox pens. A moment he paused. This was a fine bunch of foxes. Twenty thousand dollars was nearer the figure. The storehouse was substantial. A first-class skin umiak leaned up against the rear side. The crazy five cornered house was new and substantial. Kushana herself—well, she was young and

not unattractive and clean. He walked on to the rise that commanded the sea in all directions.

A dot appeared in the offing to the north. That would be Nigchik paddling back with the forty fox skins. To the west—to the west—why, that was smoke.

It was a ship. It was the old coast guard vessel. Slowly it circled. It hove to, and came to a stop. That was the safe anchorage in the little bay of the Island of Four Mountains.

It would remain there all night. Joe had been in that bay many a time. The old coast guard—and Nigchik in the offing to the north.

Joe felt his mouth grow dry. His years in the service told him that the coast guard, unless some white man brought the news, might never learn of the killing of Johnanson. Unless the guard ship did learn of the murder, and start an investigation, he could step into Johnanson's boots, and live on in comfort and luxury for years, until such time as his ownership of the island, the buildings, and the foxes would be past all dispute.

The dot that would be Nigchik, the avenger, grew larger. It was headed toward the little beach below the crazy, five-cornered Johnanson house. Joe glanced back. Kushana was standing in the doorway, her attitude, the wistful droop of her head a plea to him to stay, to stay on forever. He lifted a big hand, gave her an awkward wave, and walked down the slope and out of sight from the cabin.

A squat, powerfully built Aleut was driving his bidarka on with easy paddle strokes. In the forward manhole in the skin deck, Joe could see the ends of a bundle of fox pelts.

Nigchik beached the canoe, stepped out, lifted the bundle of pelts, and laid them upon the beach. He reached in beneath the deck, and drew forth a seal spear. Holding the weapon in his grasp, Nigchik turned slowly and fastened his little shoe button eyes upon the white man.

"You're a party called Nigchik, hain't you?" demanded Joe, walking slowly toward the Aleut, and keeping a wary eye on that seal spear. "You *cumtux* English, white man talk?"

"I talk white man," answered Nigchik in his deep, chesty voice. "Who you? What you want? You go away from here. This place belong by me now. Womans

up there, she belong by me. You go away from here."

Joe advanced a farther step. Now, he estimated, he could be upon the Aleut all sprawled out before the latter could possibly poise and hurl the spear.

"Look now, Nigchik," said Joe, waving a finger under the native's nose, "you hain't going to deliver them fox pelts. No, Kushana she's selected out a man of her own. Yeah."

"Maybe she take you for mans, eh?" Nigchik's little eyes began to gleam with cunning as he appraised the tattered clothing, the disheveled appearance of the white man. Nigchik had seen white beachcombers before.

"Yeah," answered Joe Bush. "She kind of let on like I might sling my hammock in her *wickiup* if I wanted to."

"Forty prime fox skins there," said Nigchik, pointing to the pelts. "I got ten more home, fifty fox pelts. You know how much money that is? Listen, white man. I go up to the house. As soon as I throw these forty fox skins across the doorway into the house, then Kushana is mine again. You come then, and I give to you the forty fox skins, and I take to my other house, and give ten skins more. Then you go away, to Unimak. You be rich mans. You buy fine new parka, and easy have white womans, one, two, white womans. What you say?"

Joe pondered. Fifty such fox skins would be worth a fortune. This was the second time within an hour that wealth had been thrust at him. Kushana had offered her own affectionate self, plus a fortune. Now Nigchik, a big chief who could afford luxuries, offered a reward to be won rather easily by merely accepting the skins, making his way to Unimak, and forgetting what he knew about the tragedy in the house of five corners.

"Oh, yes, white mans," said Nigchik eagerly, as he read shrewdly the signs of weakening, "you come in just little while, and I give you the forty skins. Then I take you to my other house, give ten skins more. You come up soon."

Nigchik, the bundle of pelts grasped in one thick hand, the other holding to the haft of the seal spear, started to pass Joe Bush. A dozen steps the squat, powerful figure had waddled on up the trail when Joe was beside him, and had let his own grab hook of a hand fall upon the parka clad shoulder of the chief.

"Belay a minute, hearty! You hain't to warp in and pester that girl none. No!"

Nigchik dropped the bundle of skins. With an animal-like snarl, he drew back the spear, and thrust it sword wise at the white breast.

By a fraction of an inch, Joe flirled aside the spear, tore it from the Aleut's grasp, and hurled him to the earth.

But the native was up in a bound. With a bull-like rush, he was upon Joe, striking with a stiffened thumb at the eyes, in a cruel and crafty attempt to blind his adversary.

They clinched and fell, gouging, striking, rolling like fighting dogs. Again and again, Joe drove his pistonlike blows into the flat, yellow face of the Aleut. Nigchik fastened his teeth in Joe's wrist, slashing the flesh like a cougar tearing its prey.

Again and again, the white man struck the native to earth. But the fellow was up, and back into the fray with maniacal frenzy, with powers unabated. Joe's face was a bleeding mass, a pattern of deep scratches where Nigchik had struck again and again with stabbing thumb to blind him.

Once Nigchik got him by the throat. Joe fell to his knees, and flopped upon his back, dragging the Aleut with him. Then, by a dexterous twist, a turn, by sheer force of leverage, he ripped free from that deadly clutch.

This couldn't last. The white man's breath was wheezing from his tortured lungs like escaping steam. The blood had blinded him, and his long arms and heavy fists were flailing wildly. He was hoping, by luck, to land a conclusive blow.

Again those terrible hands were feeling for the white man's throat. Joe suddenly cast both his arms about the thick girth of the native, and shut down with all his strength. Deliberately then, the gross body clasped in his arms, Joe dove headforemost into a mass of beach boulders. The bullet-shaped head of Nigchik struck upon a stone.

Joe let go his grasp, and rolled weakly to one side. With the back of his hand, he cleared the blood from his eyes. Nigchik lay sprawled, his mouth opening and closing like the gills of a dying fish. The fight was over.

Bush got weakly to his feet and staggered to the bidarka. Under the skin decking, he found the ever present coil of rawhide. Securely, he bound the Aleut's heavy wrists

and thick ankles, and loaded him into the frail craft. The bundle of fox pelts he lowered through the after manhole of the boat, shoved them back toward the stern, got in, and took up the paddle.

After a voyage that seemed interminable, Joe finally brought his cranky craft up to the sea ladder of the coast guard vessel. "Give a hand," he shouted to a man on deck. "I'm stove up bad, and hain't fit to pack this party to the deck."

Two guardsmen came down the ladder, lifted Nigchik and carried him to the deck.

Joe Bush, thus far unrecognized, followed them.

"Heave that party into the brig," said Joe, pointing to his prisoner. "I want to fetch a *gam* with the Old Man."

To fetch a *gam*, means "to talk."

"All right," said the guardsman. "It's Joe, hain't it?"

"Yeah."

A moment later, Bush stood, a tremendous and appalling figure before the captain of the ship. Very briefly, he told the story of the killing in the house of five corners.

"I'll go now," he said, when he had concluded. "Will you let a man put me ashore in the dinky?"

"Why didn't you take consort with that Aleut girl, Joe? Lots of white men do."

"Never, since I been in the service, has any of our boys took up with a native woman," Bush replied.

"Then, why didn't you take Nigchik on his offer. You could have gone to Seattle, and rolled her high for a year or so, Joe. Why didn't you?"

"I done the service about all the harm I could, captain, when I got drunk at

Numiak, and let that prisoner escape. Yeah, I figured I'd done the service enough dirt. I didn't take Nigchik's offer because, far as I know, no guardsman in the North ever took even a thin dime for a crooked deal. I'll go now, if you'll let a man put me ashore in the dink."

"Some fight, Joe," said the Old Man, grinning. "You look some stove up. Some fight."

"Warmest I ever had," Joe agreed. "I'll go now."

"You're dirty, Joe, and ragged. You're a disgrace. Belay a minute."

The Old Man touched a button. An orderly appeared.

"Send the ship's tailor. Tell him to fetch along a new uniform, forty-two chest, thirty-two waist, and pants thirty-three long. Have him break a brand new one out of the slop chest."

In his presence, the captain made Joe Bush divest himself of his rags and don the new uniform. Then he turned to his desk, opened a little cubby-hole, brought forth the insignia that once Joe Bush had worn, a pair of white crows. "Sew these back on the sleeve of Joe Bush where they belong," he ordered.

"Now, Joe," the captain went on, when the crows had been sewed in place, "you lay forward to your old quarters. Wait a minute! When you hear the boson pipe the chow call, you come here. You and I are going to eat supper together in my cabin."

Joe Bush, hard-boiled, two-fisted, stumpled forward, descended the companionway, and fell into his old bunk, face downward, where he lay blubbering like an overwrought child.

IMMUNE

NEVER reproach me for my faithlessness.
I say this thing to you, and you, and you—
What is another lover more or less
To one who knows not what love is at all?
How shall the springtime differ from the fall
To fir trees, green and placid all year through?
How may a lily, rooted in a stream,
Having its own face on the gloom for dream,
Hold sunlight precious or require the dew?
Never reproach me—you, or you, or you!

Marcia Nardi

A Box at the Opera

PATTY WAS A LADY TO START WITH, SO IT WAS EASY FOR HER TO MASQUERADE AS A LEADER OF FASHION

By Elizabeth Burgess Hughes

LITTLE Patty Anderson was the last person in the world you'd connect with crime of any sort. Heart-shaped face, soft brown eyes, a tender mouth, and a dimple in her right cheek; yet if Robert Braithwaite had died, instead of getting well, she might easily have been involved in an ugly murder case with a triangle of three women. With the gayest and most innocent intentions, she would undoubtedly have figured loathsomely in the headlines.

For, of course, they'd have found out, sooner or later, that it wasn't really the beautiful Mrs. Braithwaite who sat in her box at the opera that night, looking like a lady out of a story book in her glittering white gown and rich ermine cloak, while her husband was being shot down in cold blood, but Patty Anderson, an insignificant unknown, who had no business to be there.

Patty had kept up with the Four Hundred of New York since she was sixteen. Not through personal contact, for she was merely a shopgirl in one of the big department stores—gloves, third aisle over from the street entrance—but by faithful and passionate study of the society columns in the newspapers. She always thought she resembled, in some degree, one of society's beautiful leaders, Mrs. "Bobby" Braithwaite. She imitated her smile, pose of the head and hands. She was secretly rather proud of the resemblance.

Like the immortal Nelly of the old song, Patty was a lady. Offspring of gentle Southerners who never had enough money, Patty was different from most of her fellow workers in that she had dignity and reserve. Also, she never said: "I seen 'im," nor "So I says to him." She'd had to make her living since she was sixteen—she was only nineteen now; and at times she felt very grown-up and disillusioned.

She was given to day dreaming, however, and the glorious Prince Charming of every woman's fancy hovered beautifully if vaguely in the back of her mind. Patty was a frail little thing, with faint smudges under her brown eyes; wistful, hopeful, always expecting fate to turn the next corner.

She thought it must be wonderful to have lots of money, with a limousine and personal maid, and a dressing table covered with perfumes and imported powders, and a little white Pomeranian to tuck under one's arm. The wonderful creatures she read about in the papers had all of these things.

Instead of tumbling out of bed into the cold flat she shared with Inez and Sara, hurrying into her clothes, swallowing a hasty bite of breakfast, and rushing to the subway to be battered and bruised by a horde of cross, sleepy humanity, how delightful it would be to wake up in a silken bed with a French maid coming in to say that *madame's* bath waited. Or would it be *mam'selle*? No, she couldn't visualize luxury without a husband somewhere in the background, and since in the use of the imagination one may as well be hung for a goat as a sheep, Patty always thought of him as a sort of living answer to the maiden's prayer—handsome, distinguished; a polished gentleman and an ardent lover.

She encountered many types of men at the glove counter, it was true, but so far only one man had come up to her mental specifications. She always grew a little dreamy and absent-minded when she thought of him. Apparently he had an insane passion for gloves, for he was always returning for new ones. His gentle courtesy was unflinching. Patty's heart thumped excitedly as she tried on dozens of gloves for this exacting customer, feeling, mean-

while, his admiring gaze on her downcast face.

It had been three months now, since he'd bought his first pair. His glove complex had evidently grown like the famous beanstalk. He had bought innumerable pairs since. How good-looking he was, mused Patty, thinking shyly of his bright blue eyes that twinkled, his firm, pleasant mouth, tall, muscular figure, and boyish, half embarrassed way of apologizing for coming back very often: "Just lost the last pair I own—I'm a whiz at losing things."

A nice fellow. She wondered what his name was. He'd never told her. But he did seem rather interested in her. Oh, well, probably he was interested in lots of girls. He would be, as good-looking as he was.

"Say, Patty, it says here that the 'Bobby' Braithwaite household is about on the rocks," observed her roommate, Inez, who had the counter next to hers. Inez affectionately smoothed the back of her shingled head, eyes following the printed page. She knew of her co-laborer's admiration for "swells," and was generous when she ran across any items of interest. "Another divorce, I guess. Here's her picture—honestly, she looks something like you. Only her hair's blond."

"No. It's white," said Patty.

"Huh?" skeptically.

"Didn't you know that? Some illness or other when she was about sixteen. It turned white, and she never did anything about it. I think it's stunning with that young face of hers."

"Why, how old is she?"

"She isn't over twenty-one now."

"For goodness' sake! A young girl gray like that! Don't seem natural. I thought she was a blonde," returned Inez reluctantly.

"Just at first glance you'd think so—but if ever you saw her in evening dress! My, she's lovely. Just like those famous beauties that used to powder their hair. And she gets the most marvelous clothes from Paris—one of those big designers over there makes them for her."

"Where'd you see her in evening duds?"

"At the opera," said Patty importantly.

"My! Ain't we high-hat?" mocked her friend.

"You know I saved up, and went twice this winter. She was in her box right across from me—I could see her as plain as any-

thing. She was dressed all in white with an ermine wrap. She looked like little Snowwhite in the fairy tale."

"Gee, you got a crush on her, all right!" Inez laughed good-naturedly.

Between customers Patty read the newspaper. It said that rumor had it all wasn't serene in the Braithwaite household. In fact, proceedings for divorce might be expected at any time. It was reported that Mrs. Braithwaite was insanely jealous of her liege lord, whose interest was obviously elsewhere. And so forth and so on.

Patty handed back the paper contemptuously. "I don't believe it!" she announced.

"Why what d' you know about it?"

"Nothing. Only she looks happy—"

"You can't tell about those society women. They keep on smiling while Paris burns—or was it Rome? They have to. People expect it of them. Well, for the love of Mike! Speaking of angels and their rustling wings—there she is!"

II

ALTHEA BRAITHWAITE, intent on her shopping, thought hurriedly as she passed the glove counter that she really ought to select some new gloves. But she was tired, and several important engagements awaited her.

But she didn't hurry past, as she had meant to do. Instead she stood quite still, looking at Patty. Her idle glance, straying past the saleswoman, had come back with a mild feeling of shock.

The girl was enough like her to be her twin!

She'd heard of doubles, but she never believed any two people ever looked identically alike. But here was a likeness that was positively amazing. The girl's hair was dark brown, yet to a casual acquaintance she might almost pass for Althea Braithwaite. So she stood gazing, too fascinated to move.

It was Patty who shortened her startled scrutiny. "Can I help you?" She repeated the saleswoman's polite formula with a smile.

"Thank you. Something in beige, I think."

While Patty, trembling with the pleasure of serving her goddess, selected and fitted, her customer watched her narrowly.

Brown eyes—white skin—heart-shaped face. Yes, even to the dimple in the right cheek. The mouth was warmer and fuller

than hers, the teeth prettier. The hair made a difference, too, but even so, the resemblance was simply incredible. Did the girl behind the counter realize it, too? How could she help it?

"Do you know," the customer asked abruptly, as Patty wrote down her name, "you rather resemble a cousin of mine, Miss—Miss—"

"My name is Patty Anderson. Not really?"

Mrs. Braithwaite had expected to have the spell broken when the girl spoke, but to her surprise the little saleswoman's voice was gentle and low.

"Quite a decided resemblance. Are you a native New Yorker?"

"No," said Patty. "I'm from South Carolina."

They exchanged a few pleasant sentences, and "Mrs. Bobby" passed on.

Patty was thrilled. She had actually talked with Althea Braithwaite!

III

"LARRY, it's the most astonishing thing! She looks exactly like me!"

"I've noticed it," said the tall young man with the twinkling blue eyes.

"Oh, you have! Now, just when—"

"I first observed Miss Patty Anderson some weeks ago, to be exact. Ever since you unfeelingly turned me down I've been trying to find somebody who looked like you. One day I stopped to buy some gloves, and, by George, I nearly jumped out of my skin. I thought for a minute you were selling gloves. Then I discovered it wasn't you, but some one almost as delightful—and I've been going back at intervals just to assure myself I'm not pipe-dreaming."

"Oh, well, I'm an ordinary enough type. There are thousands of me. Take away my hair, and I'm just another of the mousy, small, brown-eyed sisterhood."

"You do play up to your hair, don't you, lovely thing? Sometimes when I see you with those dangling earrings and Lanvin gowns, I wonder if you're the same Allie I used to know. You were an angel once—a sweet little angel—"

"Oh, Larry! Larry!" She covered her ears. "Remember that if I'm lovely lady, I'm also lady-in-love-with-her-husband. I don't believe any man's flattery but his, and in a moment you'll be telling me I'm still an angel."

"I'm not so sure about that! You're a credulous soul, though, Allie. And a good sport."

"You mean—"

"Oh, nothing." Did she think she could fool him? Didn't every one know that Braithwaite was in love with his secretary? Being seen, openly, with her everywhere? A brazen, green-eyed, vampish creature with gold-digger written all over her. Poor Althea.

She did not question him further. He thought she deliberately avoided doing so. He began to talk of Patty Anderson.

"I liked her first because she reminded me of you, and now I like her for her own sake. She's rather a dear little thing. I want you to know her, Allie."

"A shopgirl?"

"Now, my dear! You've never been a snob in your life—don't begin now. Would you mind asking her here to tea some afternoon?"

Mrs. Braithwaite appeared to ponder. "You really want me to?"

"Most earnestly. I've had no chance really to meet her, you know, because she isn't the type to allow herself to be picked up, and—"

Althea laughed, and ran her fingers through her fluffy white anomalous locks. "Yours to command!" she promised whimsically. "Disappointed suitor enlists interest of his beloved in new flame—"

"Don't be silly," advised Larry, who'd known Althea since their nursery days. "Then I can depend on your sympathy and so forth?"

"Unalterably. Will the lady be amenable to my efforts in your behalf?"

"I don't know about that. But who could resist you? She looks lonely, and rather wistful. Dog-gone it, it's you wistful women who make fools of men. We're filled with the wild desire to do something for you."

As he was leaving: "What's that?" he demanded suddenly.

"What's what?"

"I thought I heard a baby crying."

"Nonsense," retorted Mrs. Braithwaite firmly. "I have no children."

"So I've been led to believe, but that sounds infernally like—"

"Run along, Larry." She was flushed, oddly flustered. "I'll call you when I've seen your Miss Anderson."

"My Miss Anderson!" He laughed.

"I ought to rebuke you, but on the whole that doesn't sound half bad!"

IV

MISS ANDERSON was amenable. As she told Inez afterward, she was thrilled to death. She could scarcely believe it yet. That lovely silvery voice: "How like dear Cousin Babbie you are! You must meet her some time. Oh, by the way, couldn't you drop in soon—say Wednesday—around four thirty for a cup of tea? I'd love to have you."

Patty swallowed quickly. "You're very kind to ask me. I'll be glad to—that is, if Inez 'll finish up my hour. She's awfully nice about helping me out."

Mrs. Braithwaite glanced carelessly at the gum-chewing Inez. "Good. Then I shall see you Wednesday?"

For four days—this was only Saturday—Patty lived happily in rosy anticipation. Tea in the Braithwaite mansion on Fifth Avenue! It was like something in a story.

But Inez was a wet blanket.

"There's something wrong, deary! Something *wrong*. That woman—you mark my words—has something up her sleeve. When those rich women come snooping round inviting girls like us to visit 'em, there's a reason behind it!"

"But—Inez! She's lovely! Couldn't she just sort of—like me?"

"She could, but she ain't apt to. We're just the working class, hon'. Why, I heard of a woman who made friends with a stenographer and introduced her to her husband, and later she sued the stenographer for something—well, now, what was it? Why, she mentioned her as correspondent, and that girl was innocent as a lamb in springtime! If Mrs. Bobby's bent on slumming, let her go somewhere else."

"Do you call this a slum? I think it's a nice store."

"Sure it is—but I bet she's got some plan or other, owing to your being the living image of her."

Was Inez jealous or just dramatic? She went to the movies three times a week, and read exciting fiction. But a vague feeling of uneasiness took hold of Patty. She was so worried she forgot to ask Inez's opinion about what she ought to wear.

V

INSTINCT, perhaps, made her put on a little brown frock and a brown hat with

a golden rose under the brim. Her cheeks were so flushed and her eyes so starry, and she looked so young and gay and happy that people turned to look at her, as she climbed to the top of the Fifth Avenue bus.

Tea on Fifth Avenue in a white palace!

She was admitted to a wonderful room, where a fire burned in a great fireplace. A tea table before it, with silver things shining in the firelight, and Mrs. Braithwaite, in a lovely flowing yellow tea gown, sitting there in a vast scarlet chair, talked lazily with a tall man, whose blue eyes twinkled.

"How do you do, Miss Anderson?" That deep laughing voice of his! Patty wanted to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. The man who bought so many gloves!

They were so kind to her, so interested. They asked about her Southern home, the shop, her ideas of business management. She lost her awe of them, and chatted as if she were Inez or Sara. She told Mrs. Braithwaite of having seen her in her box at the opera, and how she'd reminded her of Snowwhite in the fairy tale.

"That is a ducky gown," commented Althea, smiling. "I got it in Paris in the fall. But, my dear, you'd look just as pretty, dressed in my clothes and sitting in my box—maybe even prettier!"

"Do you really think so?" exclaimed Patty, startled, and playing with the idea like a child. "I've often thought it must be divine to sit in a box at the opera, with everybody staring and admiring you."

"Would you really like it?" asked the tall man, amused at her naïve frankness.

"Oh, I'd love it! If I could just once—" Then Patty broke off, blushing. How silly, and how worldly they'd think her; perhaps they'd laugh at her when she went away.

Her hostess, however, didn't look as if she wanted to laugh. She was staring at Patty curiously and intently—so curiously and intently that the girl felt embarrassed.

"That oughtn't to be an impossible ambition," murmured Mrs. Braithwaite at last. "I might manage, some fine day, to have you as a guest in my box! We'll talk it over when Larry goes home."

Larry didn't seem to be particularly keen about going home. He ate the little cakes and drank lots of tea, and talked a great deal. And when at last, reluctantly, Patty got up to go, he remarked carelessly:

"My car's at the curb. I'll run you home, if I may."

"You must come again very soon, my dear. It's been pleasant to have you," said Althea Braithwaite, pressing her hand warmly.

VI

A WEEK later Mrs. Braithwaite telephoned.

"Could you come to dinner to-night, and go to the opera?"

It sounded wonderful! Nothing could have kept Patty from delightedly accepting. But when she came to talk over with Inez what she should wear, there was consternation. She had only one even passable evening gown, and that was of insipid green.

"You can have my flame color," offered Inez graciously. "I don't approve of your going at all, if you ask *me*—I tell you *that woman's got something on her mind*—but I don't blame you for wanting to go, kiddo."

But Patty, instead of considering the flame color, plunged recklessly into debt, in order to go attired in purple and fine linen. The new gown was white—not gorgeously, glittering white like Mrs. Braithwaite's, but simply and severely so, of rich pale crape, short and chic, with a white magnolia flower on the shoulder. Patty felt at peace with the world, as she recklessly ordered a taxi to take her to the Braithwaite house.

"My dear, how sweet you look!" cried Althea Braithwaite graciously.

They dined alone, not in a big stately dining room, with a butler and maid in attendance, as Patty had expected, but on a little table in Mrs. Braithwaite's own sitting room upstairs, with that lady pouring the coffee and waiting on her guest like any ordinary person, and not a servant in sight.

Afterward: "Now, dear girl, I'm going to ask a favor. I'm positively dying to know if you really *are* my double! Will you put on the Snowwhite outfit? Here's the wrap—" she brought it eagerly from a sweetly scented wardrobe full of beautiful things—"and here's the gown. And here"—as with a little triumphant gesture she pulled open a deep drawer—"is the white transformation I wear sometimes when I'm having my hair treated or it isn't freshly waved. Perhaps you won't look like me at all when you get these things on!"

So Mrs. Braithwaite knew that it was she, and not any Cousin Babbie, that Patty resembled. No doubt her interest in me, thought Patty, is founded merely on curiosity.

She hesitated. Those exquisite clothes—

Mrs. Braithwaite went into the adjoining room, thoughtfully leaving her alone. Quickly Patty slipped out of the little dress she'd gone into debt to buy and which looked like nothing at all in these surroundings, and put on the rich shining white gown that Snowwhite might have worn.

She warmed to her task. The feel of the silk stimulated her. She sat down at the three-mirrored dressing table and adjusted the white wig. Her brown eyes looked more vivid under it, her skin like a roseleaf. Recklessly she rerouged her mouth.

At last she stood up, and slowly, lovingly drew on the ermine cloak. Excitedly she stared back at her own reflection!

"Oh, I do, I *do* look like her!" she whispered ecstatically.

Then Mrs. Braithwaite came in, and the two girls stood side by side, looking into the mirror. Althea was wearing a flowing white negligee almost elaborate enough for a ball dress, and the effect was startling.

Any one half asleep or defiantly demonstrating that Mr. Volstead was mistaken, might have thought that he was seeing double, had he seen them.

Each was a replica of the other.

VII

"Now, my dear," said Mrs. Braithwaite, "you won't mind, will you, if I send you *alone* to the opera? I'm bored to death with gadding, and it'll be such fun to stay at home and rest, while I'm apparently sitting quite dutifully in my box at the Metropolitan listening to Jeritza!"

"You mean—you want me to pretend to be you?"

"Won't it be a lark? You'll enjoy it."

"But—"

"There's a fashionable wedding out on Long Island to-night. Few of my friends will be at the opera. If anybody visits your box, you've only to nod and smile languidly; but lest somebody asks you a catch question I'm going to coach you a bit.

"Peter Loomis, dear old thing, will be sure to dodder round, and he'll want to know if you've adopted any children yet. Then he'll chuckle. You've only to murmur: 'Not yet, dear Mr. Loomis.'

"If Carol Leeke comes, you've only to smile sweetly—he never listens. Hester Grange may happen in, and she'll be sure to ask where Robert is. You must say: 'Oh, Bobby's being particularly domestic to-night. He has a cold and decided to go to bed early. Unique, isn't it?' Then—"

"Oh, I see!" cried Patty romantically. "You want to stay at home with your husband!"

"Well—" a little wry turn of the mouth—"he may prefer to be alone. He always does when he isn't feeling so well. Now, my dear, you're all ready. No—wait. You must wear my pearls. That costume really needs pearls."

She went to a little wall cabinet, and took out a long string of the most beautiful pearls Patty had ever seen anywhere; lusciously deep, translucent, glistening.

"Oh!" Patty drew a deep breath, protested. "They're lovely, Mrs. Braithwaite, but really, I'd rather not. The responsibility—the—"

"Nonsense! They're safe. My chauffeur's taking you there and bringing you back. Nothing 'll happen, except that you've had a splendid evening!"

She would be Snowwhite—she, Patty Anderson, and for one night have all the thrills she'd dreamed of. How marvelous that fate had given her such a friend as Mrs. Braithwaite.

So she sat in state, alone in the opera box, looking down at the people, who glanced at her and then turned to find her name among the box owners. Were they envying her? She wondered if she looked as beautiful as Mrs. Braithwaite had, and then decided that nobody could—it wasn't possible.

The music was so heavenly she seemed to be lifted off her feet, swept with it.

But at last it was over, and snuggled in her ermine cloak, she wended her way down to the lobby, trying to look blasé and indifferent, and succeeding not at all.

One by one the motors were called, and finally her own.

She sank with a sigh of pure enjoyment into its luxurious depths. They moved out into the brilliance of Broadway and over toward the river. Minutes later everything seemed to Patty to grow suddenly strange. For her eyes, opening languidly, had rested astonished on the silver flower holder where red roses had replaced the valley lilies that were there when they left the house. She

reached up, felt of them curiously. They weren't fresh—they were made of paper.

And now she saw that the car wasn't the one in which she'd gone to the opera. The cushions looked faintly soiled. There wasn't that gliding movement as if she rode in a comfortable chair. The chauffeur! He was not the man who took her to the Metropolitan!

A slow, cold fear seized her. By this time they were running along through poorly lighted streets that she had never seen before.

She tapped on the glass sharply. The chauffeur did not turn. She tapped louder; no response.

Patty began to be really frightened. Where was he taking her?

The car stopped presently with a jolt in a queer, little alley so deserted and dark it might have belonged to another world.

The man jumped down, opened the door. Patty saw with a thrill of terror that he'd drawn a black mask over his eyes; just like holdup men in the movies. She shivered nervously.

"Don't be afraid, lady. I got no intention of harming you, if you act reasonable. All I want's your pearls. I've had my eye on 'em for six months. If you don't give 'em I'll take 'em. So might's well be sensible."

"Where's Mrs.—my chauffeur?" she quavered.

"He had a drink with me while you was listening to the music. He passed out, for the time being. Nobody hurt, *yet*, you see—all I want's the pearls."

Mrs. Braithwaite's beautiful pearls! She clutched them frantically. They were probably worth a fortune.

"Oh, but I—I can't—"

"All right then, lady. It's up to me—" But the minute his hard, predatory hands reached her Patty screamed.

"Oh, take them—but don't touch me!"

He dropped the glittering string into his pocket.

"You better not go straight home, lady. I want time to make my get-away. Got a friend you might want to drop in on?"

"One-twenty Waverley Place." Oh, for safety—her own room—Inez—

He touched his cap, politely, and they rolled again into the lighted streets, over to Sixth Avenue. They glided into Waverley Place, and stopped before her own door. The man turned round briefly. Now that

his mask was off, she had a glimpse of a grim, mocking, saturnine face.

"Here y' are, Mrs. Braithwaite. Sorry I scared you, but I had to have the pearls. Good night." A gesture toward his cap, and speeding up the still throbbing engine, he disappeared in the direction of Christopher Street.

Patty felt for her latchkey with shaking hands, an incongruous figure in the magnificent opera cloak on the shabby steps. Oh, for the safety of the room she shared with Inez!

That young woman was sleeping soundly, but with the flash of light in her face she woke, stared, rubbed her eyes, stared again.

"What the—"

"Inez, dear, it's Patty. I've had a dreadful time. I—"

"For the love of Mike!"

"I've been robbed—Mrs. Braithwaite's beautiful pearls! What shall I do—what shall I do?"

Inez pulled on her old blue kimono. "I told you no good 'd come of your excursion into society, Patty Anderson! Why didn't you go straight to Mrs. Braithwaite and tell her?"

Patty explained.

"Did you get the number of the car?"

"No, I didn't. I was too excited to look."

"Dumb-bell. Wait, I'll get the Braithwaite house and you can talk to her." Huddled on a stool before the telephone in the hall she spoke softly into the mouthpiece: "May I speak to Mrs.—huh? No, Mrs. Braithwaite. Oh! Not back from the opera? When do you expect her? That so? Could we speak to Mr. Braithwaite? What? Hello—hello!" She turned. "That was a maid, I reckon. She sort of screamed when I mentioned Mr. Braithwaite. Hello! Hello! Well, she dropped the receiver. Patty, there's something wrong at that house."

Patty went white. "I'm so frightened, Inez! But I simply *must* see Mrs. Braithwaite to-night."

"H-sh—don't wake Sara. She's been to a party, and 's dead to the world. You know she can't keep a secret, and she's so curious. The only thing I can advise you to do, kid, is to get to the Braithwaite house as quick as you can."

"Oh, Inez! I'm *afraid*. Call them again—maybe somebody 'll answer!"

Inez, who had persistence whatever else she lacked, called again. Finally some one did come to the telephone.

"Who is this?" demanded a crisp, direct, man's voice.

"A friend of Mrs. Braithwaite's—Miss Anderson. She wants to speak to Mrs. Braithwaite," explained Inez, patiently.

"We do not know where Mrs. Braithwaite is. We are trying to locate her. She went to the opera, but has not returned. Mr. Braithwaite has been shot."

"S-shot? Did you say shot?"

"Yes. He has just been taken to the hospital. If you can throw any light on Mrs. Braithwaite's whereabouts—"

"My Lord! That Braithwaite guy's been murdered! Here, you talk to 'um." Inez dropped the receiver. It hung dangling.

Patty stared at her, wide-eyed, uncomprehending.

"He's been killed, y' understand?"

Suddenly Patty was dizzy and sick. She dropped into a chair.

"Poor Mrs. Braithwaite!"

"Poor nothing!" Inez threw at her.

"Listen to me, kid. The thing's plain as the nose on my face. That woman has murdered her husband. She used you for an alibi."

VIII

"No, no!" Patty cried out. "She couldn't—she—"

"But there it is, don't you see?" persisted Inez excitedly. "She planned the whole thing careful and deliberate. She probably thought of it the very first time she ever saw you at the glove counter. She sends you to the opera in that white wig so everybody 'll know *she* couldn't 'a' killed him. How could she—with her sittin' in her box at the Metropolitan? My, she's a clever one—"

Patty's teeth chattered. If anybody ever found out that Mrs. Braithwaite hadn't been in her box at the opera that night, they'd suspect her, as Inez was doing. No one must know. But where *was* Mrs. Braithwaite?

"I've got to find out," she said aloud. "Inez, I'm going back there."

"Well, I'd *advise* you to, kid! Here, I'll phone for a taxi. Take this extra dollar—you're apt to need it."

There was a crowd around the Braithwaite house. The door stood open. Patty

swept regally up the steps. A policeman stopped her, his blue eyes sympathetic.

"Mrs. Braithwaite, I guess you haven't heard—"

She saw Larry Phillips in the hall. She ran toward him.

"Oh, Larry, what is it?"

"Althea!" he exclaimed. "Come upstairs, dear. I can't tell you *here*."

And he drew her out of sight of the curious, up the steps, into Althea's sitting room.

"Patty! I was just ready to start out looking for you. I found Althea, and she told me of this crazy prank. Thank Heaven you're here, safe!"

"But she—she—"

"She's distracted over Bob—of course. I'm taking her to the hospital."

"Is he—dead?"

"I should say not! Bob's too tough to kill. A bad shoulder wound, but I doubt if it's even serious."

"Thank the Lord!" on a breath of relief. "Oh, the most awful thing has happened to-night. I lost Mrs. Braithwaite's pearls—I mean—I'll tell you about it later. Wasn't she here when—when—"

"No. She was visiting at the O'Briens', as usual. Old Peter Loomis told me about them—Irish family living over on Prince Street. Got the prettiest baby boy you ever saw. Negotiations have been going on between them and Allie for some time, concerning his adoption. She's wild for him. Cause of her and Bob's quarrel and all the rest of it. Bob didn't want to adopt any child. She used to sneak him in here for visits—"

"How did *you* get here to-night?"

"Bob's butler phoned me. I came and took Bob to the hospital, then made a bee line for the O'Briens'. Sneaked her in at the kitchen door; for on the way back, in spite of her excitement, she told me you were stepping out doing an impersonating act to-night, and I wanted no gossip—"

Althea rushed out, in a dark fur coat and hat. She brushed past Patty.

"Hurry, hurry! Bobby—he may need me!"

"Can I do anything?" quavered Patty Anderson.

"No, no! Nobody can. I don't want anything or anybody now. I just want Bobby—"

Mrs. Braithwaite began to weep wildly.

"Wait for me. I'll be back after awhile,"

Larry threw over his shoulder, as he piloted the hysterical Althea toward the door.

Patty put on her little white dress, flattened her dark hair on her cheeks, and sat down by the window.

Uncounted æons passed. Once a maid looked in, and went out without speaking. And then Larry returned.

"He's all right now. No danger, the doctor says. They're having a wonderful reunion down there in the hospital. Like the darkey who said in the electric chair that 'dis heah gwine to be a lesson to me,' Bob Braithwaite's learned his lesson. I believe he'll properly appreciate Allie now."

"But who—who—"

"Who shot him, you mean? It was that damned secretary of his," said Mr. Phillips violently. "Got in the house on a pretext of some papers or something needing his signature. He'd had more or less of an affair with her, but the thing had palled on him, and he'd told her so and discharged her. Hence the fireworks."

He looked kindly at Patty, who was pale. "I'm going to take you home now. There's nothing to worry about, my dear."

"Oh, yes, there is," she faltered. "The pearls—Mrs. Braithwaite's beautiful pearls—"

"Paste, dear child. She told me to tell you so. A clever copy of the famous string, which is in a bank vault at present."

"She—she's—awfully in love with her husband, isn't she?" queried Patty joyfully.

"Yes—I guess he's her man, all right. But she always calls on me, like the butler, when she's in trouble. Funny, isn't it?"

"She's so sweet," faltered Patty. To think that Inez thought she'd killed a man! "I hope her husband will let her have the baby."

"He will. He's so glad to be alive he'll agree to anything. Young Mr. O'Brien'll be moving in soon, bag and baggage. Yes, Althea's sweet. I used to be in love with her, you know."

"Oh!" gasped Patty. "One couldn't blame you," she added lamely.

"I said *used*," he emphasized, looking down at her in a way that made her heart begin to flutter queerly. "I'm in love with *you* now. And not just because you look like her, but because you are yourself. Don't forget that."

"I won't," promised Patty meekly. She was so radiant she looked as if she were standing in a rainbow.

All Over Town

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—EVEN THE JUDGMENT OF A SOLO-
MON MIGHT BE IN ERROR IN THIS CASE—
AS WERE THE GOSSIPS

By Reita Lambert

HATTIE FREER flicked a last, imaginary speck of dust from the sideboard, and surveyed its shining surface and all the other shining surfaces in the gloomy, handsome old dining room, with her head on one side, like a critical robin. A plump and pompous robin was Hattie, the sort of person who grows plump and a little pompous with long years of loyal service. Her cheeks were plump, and the color of a robin's breast; behind her spectacles, which she often wore perched on her forehead, her eyes were darting bright as a robin's.

Having inspected and approved her handiwork, she went into the kitchen and stowed the duster away among its fellow utilities. Then she washed her hands at the kitchen sink, looked at the clock behind the kitchen stove, and the fire inside it, took off her checked apron with a satisfaction born of the knowledge that there was a clean white one underneath it, and drew the kettle to the front of the fire. Having done all these things with little spurts and dashes of nervous energy, she hurried through the somber hall that cut the big house in two, opened the front door, and peered out across the lawn and down the road as far as she could see.

It was October, and to-day the chimneys were sighing for the vanishing summer, and the trees and shrubs cowering and shivering in a sharp autumn breeze. The old Marley place, standing as it did aloof from the village in its own generous acreage, was exposed to the first gusty herald of the approaching winter. Already the noble old trees that sentineled the lawn were nursing naked limbs and crackling in the wind like rheumatic old gentlemen. The house itself, a chaste Colonial building, was beginning

to look bleak and desolate. For a week Hattie had been thinking regretfully, "If only the poor child had come home in August, before things began to look so gone!"

The thought shadowed her eager expectation as she searched the empty road for the first glimpse of Art Hunter's flivver that would bring Agatha Marley up from the station. Autumn, Hattie reflected, was a bad time for people with memories, but worse for those who had nothing worth remembering. "And if Agatha's got anything very joyful to remember, I don't know what it is!" she had told Cassie True only that morning. From that Cassie was to infer that if Hattie didn't know, no one else did. Hattie had been housekeeper and general Pooh-Bah in the Marley household since before Professor Marley's wife had died, some twenty years ago.

She was looking off to where the road dipped toward the village and the station, when a young voice hailed her:

"Hello, Miss Freer! Are you looking for Agatha?"

Hattie's gaze did not waver, but her mouth pursed disapproval. She knew Rose Duncan's voice. She could see, without looking, the generously rouged and lip-sticked young face that was peering at her across the box brier hedge. Screened from her vision by the thick foliage, she knew, was a pair of slim but shapely legs, with stockings nude in color and exposed from ankle to kneecap.

"Agatha coming to-day?" Rose repeated, and grinned maliciously at the tight-lipped disapproval her query elicited.

Hattie said with haughty obliquity:

"I'm expecting her."

"Thought so when I saw the windows

open on my way to school this morning," Rose said cheerfully. "Thought you said she was having such a good time in New York she was going to stay? What's she coming back for?"

"Well, you know this happens to be Agatha's home, Rose," Hattie explained with labored sarcasm.

"That's the point," Rose elaborated. "Why should anybody want to go home when home means this dead hole—special-ly when they could stay in New York! Just plain dumb, I call it."

"I don't think Agatha'll be interested in what you call it, Rose."

"In that case you can scratch my name off the welcoming committee," Rose announced blithely, and lax to the wind which bore her spindling young body off like an uprooted seedling.

II

HATTIE looked after her irritably. Only part of her irritation, however, was for the girl herself and all the new-minded heresies she epitomized. Part of it was for the fact that she had put words to Hattie's own anxiety. Ever since the arrival of Agatha's letter a week before, these very questions had been nibbling away her joy in this reunion. Agatha Marley was coming back to Ellonvale, and Hattie—to whom she was dearer than all else on earth—was sorry. What was there for Agatha in Ellonvale? What would she do in the great lonely old house now that her father was gone?

But there was no time now to nurse those freshly stirred doubts. The offending legs and rouge had scarcely disappeared around the bend of the road, when Art Hunter's bronchial flivver came wheezing into view. Hattie flew down the path, and began frantically waving her arms and crying out her welcome. The flivver coughed itself to a rest before the gate, and she was reaching for the slender, bundled figure in the back seat.

"Well, Agatha! Well, here you are! What's this—here, let me have some of them bundles! Well, lamby!"

"Wait a minute, dear. Oh, your blessed self! Here, you can take these things. Art, will you carry these bags in?"

"But what you got there? Here, let me—"

"No, I'll carry it; you have enough."

Plucking frenziedly at the girl's laden arms without result, Hattie trotted up the

path in the wake of Art's lank figure. In the hall there was a moment of confusion, during which she never left off raining words of welcome, and Agatha gave some directions to the jitney driver. Then they were alone in a billowing sea of bundles and bags, and Agatha was saying:

"No—wait, dear! I can't take off my coat yet; the baby's wrapped in it."

"The baby?" Hattie repeated.

Agatha nodded, and wriggled something free of the ensnawling cloth. "Look. Gracious, she's awake!"

With her plump face wiped blank of expression, Hattie stepped closer and peered down at the shapeless bundle in Agatha Marley's arms.

"A baby!" she said, and catapulted back against the wall as though the word had been a cannon ball.

"Well, her waked up, did her?" Agatha marveled fondly.

"A baby! Agatha Marley, what on earth—you don't mean you—where in the name of goodness—well, my *land*!"

Agatha laughed, bent, and kissed the ruddy cheek. "Let's go into the kitchen. Is there a fire there? It's so chilly. I'm afraid the little thing will be cold." Blindly, Hattie led the way to the kitchen. "Oh, Hattie, how natural it all looks!"

"Agatha, whose baby is that?"

"Why, Hattie dear, it's mine."

"Yours!"

"Ours," Agatha corrected. "See, she's looking at you. Aren't her eyes sweet? I'm going to adopt her, and we're going to bring her up."

"Adopt her!"

Agatha said: "Yes—if it works out all right, and her own mother doesn't turn up. But that isn't likely."

She lifted her eyes from the baby to smile at Hattie, but at sight of that stricken face she burst suddenly into laughter—and as suddenly was crying. It restored the stupefied housekeeper as nothing else could have done. With one masterly gesture she scooped the supine infant into her arms, dragged off Agatha's coat, and drew a low rocker up to the stove. "There, sit down there, lamby! You're chilled through yourself. Thank goodness, the kettle's boiling; a hot cup of tea'll set you up."

"I guess I'm tired," Agatha said, and tried to smile. "Then—coming back to the old place—"

"Yes, lovey. Don't try to talk now!

See—I'll put the mite here on the sofa and pull a chair up. Now her tan't fall off, tan her? Goodness, what a little thing it is—can't be more'n a couple of months old."

"It's four months," Agatha told her; but Hattie said:

"Don't you talk now," and snatched the teapot off the shelf, and cups and saucers and a jar of crisp cookies. "Take your hat off, lamb. Well, I *am* relieved. Rose Duncan said every woman in New York had her hair cut. There—drink that! I just made them cookies this morning."

"You old blessed! How good it tastes. This old kitchen always was the most comfy room in the house." Her eyes pivoted over the room, with its high old painted cupboards, ruffled curtains at the windows, bright rag rugs, ancient clock on the shelf behind the stove with the bottle of "magic pain killer" beside it, a faded print of Watts's "Hope" over the sink. That picture had been the gift of his Ellonvale admirers to the late Professor Marley, who had promptly relegated it to the woodshed from which Hattie had rescued it. "The same old place!"

"It was mighty dirty," Hattie said, "bein' shut up so long. Took me a week diggin'—"

Agatha, her eyes on the haircloth sofa beneath the window, said anxiously: "Oh, I'm afraid she's going to cry!"

"No, her's not." Hattie stooped and swept the infant up against her breast. "My goodness, I haven't held such a little thing since you were like this, twenty-four or five years ago."

"I'm afraid she's getting hungry — she had a bottle on the train—the matron at the orphanage fixed one for me. Art ought to be here soon with the milk and things."

Hattie, with the baby pinned against her broad bosom, like a plaster, entreated suddenly, piteously, "Agatha, what have you brought this mite here for? *What* did you want of a baby?"

"I suppose you think I'm mad," Agatha said, and set her empty cup on the back of the stove. "Sit down, dear. Look at me."

III

HATTIE sat down and looked at the girl who had been destined for a rôle of self-immolation since her tired mother had relinquished it—and gladly, Hattie believed—some twenty years before, at the face

which, even as a child's, had never been dimpled or mischievous like any other child's, nor, as a girl's, luminous with girlish dreams. A quaint face judged by today's full-flowered beauty, with delicately wrought features, and grave gray eyes, and quantities of thick, smooth hair wrapped primly about the small head. Matured by years of service and sacrifice to that arrogant and brilliant invalid, her father, there was yet something of arrested childhood about the wistful, unsmiling mouth and eyes, something of the dimly perceptible charm that is to be found in a faded daguerreotype.

"Do I look mad, Hattie?"

"You look peaked," Hattie declared beligerently. "You look as if you haven't had such a—such a good time after all."

"Hattie, I had a terrible time."

"My land!"

"A terrible time," Agatha repeated with a certain grim satisfaction in the admission.

"Dear me!" Hattie said miserably.

"And here all the time I've been hoping—"

"Yes, I know. I remember what you said when I went away. You said 'For goodness sake get away where you'll have a chance to get a little life in you like other girls.' Remember?"

"Well, I thought maybe in New York—"

"Yes, you thought there was plenty of life in New York, and so there is. But I've learned that the livelier a place is the less use they have for—for dead ones."

"Good gracious, Agatha!"

"I know now how a mummy would feel if some experimental young scientist were to revive it and turn it loose on Broadway."

"To hear you talk—"

"A mummy," Agatha said, "wouldn't be more helpless and out of place than I was." She shifted her position quickly until her knees touched Hattie's. "What would you do if I were to say to you, 'So's your old man!'"

"So's my old man what?" Hattie asked guardedly.

"Exactly," Agatha exulted. "You don't speak the modern language any more than I do. And that's not the only one. There's another, 'You're all wet'—only it doesn't mean that. I heard a girl say it over the telephone at the hotel, and how could she know?"

Hattie, with her mouth open, was looking at the late Professor Marley's daughter

with alarm. Agatha reached across, and gave her shoulder a reassuring pat.

"Don't be frightened, dear. I'm just trying to tell you why I've come home and brought the baby."

"Why, you haven't," Hattie cried indignantly, "said a word about the baby!"

"No," Agatha admitted, "I suppose I haven't. Well, I got the little thing because—well, a baby carriage isn't very different from a wheel chair, and I'm used to pushing something around and waiting on somebody—if you make that noise you'll scare the baby! It's all I'm fitted for, Hattie."

"Rubbish!"

"It's quite true. I've lived too long in father's generation to fit into my own."

"Turn it over on its little tummy," Hattie wailed helplessly, and inverted the baby. "My land, Agatha, to hear you talk—"

"You don't know what it is," Agatha said fiercely, "to feel that you don't fit, to hear men and women your own age talking and laughing and not be able to understand! But they're alive, Hattie, and I'm—I'm dead. I've been buried out here with father so long that I don't know how to live. I've been father's shadow so long that there isn't any real me. When I went away I thought now I'll be something besides the professor's daughter, and let my own ego bloom. But there wasn't anything to bloom, not so much as a tiny shoot."

Hattie exploded violently: "Nonsense!"

"It's true, and it's just as well I found it out, because now I know what I'm going to do with that baby. She's going to have a personality all her own! She—"

"But where did you—"

"Oh. Well, I happened to pass an orphanage pretty often, and one day, when I was particularly depressed, I noticed all those poor babies—not this one, of course, but others—playing around in the yard—not a blade of grass in it, either—and all of a sudden I knew what I wanted to do. What do you think I did?"

Hattie shook her head feebly.

"I went right in, and I said, 'I'd like to adopt a baby, please!'"

"You did!"

Agatha nodded. "You've no idea how much better I felt, too. Well, the matron and I talked a little, and I learned that a little baby is lots harder to take care of than an old one; so I said I'd take the smallest one they had. *That* was pink

nose there." Hattie looked bleakly down at the nose in question. "She'd been left inside the gate just that morning, the pinkest, homeliest little thing. I wanted it right away, but they advised me to leave it until it was a little older and stronger, and then, if the mother didn't turn up, they said—"

"My land!" a faint echo from Hattie.

"I could adopt it. So I decided to wait, and what do you think I did all the time I was waiting?"

Hattie didn't know, but she steeled herself for the worst.

"I went up to the university and took a course in child psychology."

"Child sike—"

"A course of lessons to teach me how to be a good mother," Agatha explained, and relaxed with a sigh.

Hattie continued to rock violently. Her face was very red, her lips pursed tight. Abruptly she got out of her chair, laid the baby on the sofa, and came back to gather the lax figure into her arms. A warm, wet trickle on her neck, and she became orally inspired.

"He was a tyrant, even if he was a great man—a selfish tyrant. I used to tell him he was robbing his own child of her rights. Yes, I did! It was the same with your mother! He was a tyrant. He never cared for anything except himself and his old work!"

"Oh, hush, Hattie. You mustn't—"

"Oh, mustn't I? When you come home and bring somebody else's brat!"

"But I want to, Hattie."

"Push a baby carriage!"

"I really love the little thing."

"When you ought to be out dancing the—whatever it is they dance nowadays."

"I'm going to send her to dancing school, Hattie."

"What," Hattie demanded, "are folks going to say at your lugging home a baby to raise?"

Agatha shook her head and reached for her bag. "She's on a formula. Here it is, in my baby book—no, that's the record from the orphanage. We must be careful of that. It tells the date of the baby's birth, as close as they can figure it—things like that."

"Like getting a receipt for something you've bought," Hattie sniffed.

"Here's the formula, barley water; that has to be boiled. I wonder when Art—oh, here he is now."

Hattie went, muttering, in response to a clamor on the back door, and the jitney driver lumbered in with a large bundle.

"You oughta seen Felix Crane when I give him the order," Art chuckled. "I thought he'd die on the spot. He wanted to know what *you* wanted with baby bottles, and barley, and—"

"Tell him we want 'em for cucumber pickles," Hattie advised scornfully. "Where's the milk?"

"Ain't it come?" Art looked about him with an injured air. "I ran up to Mis' Duncan's on my way down town. She said she'd send a quart right over."

"Put them things down on the table," Hattie commanded, and assaulted the bundle fiercely.

Agatha said, "I wish you'd go down to the station early in the morning, Art. I sent some things out by express." When he had gone she told Hattie, "We can sterilize the bottles and put the barley over to boil. I hope the milk comes soon. The little thing ought to be bathed and in bed by six."

Hattie, emotionally torn as she had never been, caught gratefully at the suggestion, saw a comforting army of duties advancing. "Where's the little thing going to sleep?"

"I've just been thinking. Suppose we give her the south room; it's sunny—"

"A whole room all to herself!"

"That's what all modern, scientific babies have," Agatha said, and bustled upstairs and down again, arms laden. Hattie sighed. Here was the old Agatha whom she had never wanted to see again—preoccupied, duty ridden, none too tidy, a little flurried—the professor's daughter.

"My land!" she scolded. "Isn't that your old blue serge you went away in?"

Agatha, who had paused on the wing to give the barley a stir, looked guiltily down at the dress she was wearing. "Why, yes, I guess it is, Hattie."

"If that isn't like you! And you promised me to buy you some new clothes."

"And I did, dear," Agatha told her quickly. "Some lovely things; they're in my trunk. Wait till you see them—"

"Trunk!" Hattie barked. "What good they going to do you in your trunk? Why didn't you wear 'em?"

IV

THIS was a sore point with Hattie. Clothes were not taken lightly in Ellon-

vale, where, to the housekeeper's evergreen wrath, Agatha had never been regarded as anything but a utilitarian appendage to the town's celebrity. How often she had boasted: "Put Agatha Marley in a stylish dress and fuss her up a bit—"

"I meant to, Hattie dear, when I bought them. 'They're lovely, but somehow I didn't feel right in them.'"

"Oh, botheration!"

Agatha asked brightly: "What's the news, Hattie? Anything important happened since I've been gone?"

"No," Hattie grumbled, and launched her recital. "Mis' Duncan's gone up two cents on her milk. Old Tod Crane's retired and deeded the drug store over to Felix."

"Well, well!"

"He goes to New York once a month on business. Last time he came back you should have seen the suit he'd bought. Art Hunter's sweet on Rose Duncan."

"Is Rose old enough to have beaux?"

Eyes and shoulders did a graphic pantomime of Hattie's opinion of Rose. "Land knows what she'll turn out to be if she's like this at eighteen! Skirts no longer than *that*, and red stuff all over her mouth. Her mother must be blind as a bat."

"Now, *she'd* be at home in New York," Agatha said thoughtfully.

"I suppose you know that man's up here—Mr. Mason, the one who's writing a book on your father. He came to see me the first day I opened up the house. Wanted to know when you'd be back."

"Andrew Mason," Agatha mused. "I remember."

"He said he thought you could help him with his book."

"He came here once with his father ever so long ago. I was fifteen, I think. He must have been twenty. I thought he was the handsomest man I'd ever seen."

"Human interest," Hattie explained. "He said he wanted some human interest touches."

"His hair was brown; his eyes were, too, I think. Some one's knocking, dear."

"Guess it's the milk," Hattie said, and opened the door to Mrs. Duncan herself.

A large woman, some years a widow, Mrs. Duncan was an important personage in Ellonville. Since her husband's death she had successfully conducted the Ellonvale dairy. She had, the town said, a way with cows. There was an undeniable physical affinity. The same angularity of hips

and shoulders was apparent, the same knot-tiness of elbows and ankles. As a voice in village affairs, she was deferred to, and her manner had the portentousness of a public figure. She never smiled without qualifying it immediately afterward with a frown. She came into the Marley kitchen with a somber air that was a silent tribute to the departed professor, and a grave smile for his daughter. Behind her pressed two of her most devoted satellites, Cassie True and Mrs. Doty. She held out a large, gloved hand, and said:

"Well, Agatha!"

The baby was still on the sofa—but no longer inert. In its enswaddling blanket it presented a convulsive eruption of pink eider down, and occasionally emitted a hostile squeak. For all this the visitors favored it with not so much as a glance.

"So glad to see you back," Mrs. Duncan said politely. "When Art came in and told me that you'd come home, I decided to run over with the milk myself. Cassie happening to be there and Mrs. Doty—"

Agatha, not a little flurried by this kindly intrusion, responded somewhat inadequately to the greetings of the trio: "How nice of you. I was beginning to be anxious about the milk. Hattie, will you take it, dear? I pinned the formula over the table there. I'm afraid the poor baby is terribly hungry."

At the word they turned brightly interested faces upon the pink Vesuvius.

"Well, well! A baby!"

"Really, Agatha? Is it a 'real baby?'"

"Art told us about it, but we weren't sure whether he was fooling," Mrs. Duncan confessed.

"Are you going to adopt it, Agatha?" Cassie asked eagerly.

Agatha told Hattie over her shoulder: "Stir it well, Hattie. Yes, I hope to. Cuddling, isn't she?"

"It's a girl, then." Mrs. Doty, an egg-shaped little blond woman, inspected the baby with the critical eye of a mother of five. "Looks a little rickety to me."

"Oh, but she's not. At first we had some difficulty finding the right food, but since we've hit on this formula—"

"This warm enough?" Hattie pressed the bottle into Agatha's hand.

"Oh, she is hungry! Look at her! Just put her in my arm, dear." Cuddling the baby, Agatha looked uncertainly at her callers. "I'm afraid I'll have to take her up-

stairs; then she'll drop right off to sleep. You'll excuse me, won't you?"

They watched her go, murmuring politely. Hattie cleared her throat, and lifted defiant eyes to the trio. Ardently she wished that Agatha had been wearing one of her new dresses.

"Well," Mrs. Duncan said, "I guess this was quite a surprise to you, Hattie."

"Oh, no!" Hattie's manner implied a foreknowledge she had not cared to divulge. "It's a cute mite, isn't it?"

"Is she really going to keep it?" Cassie True pressed. Cassie was Ellonvale's fashionable dressmaker, a spare, brittle little spinster of fifty, with a sharp nose and small, thirsty eyes forever searching for some oasis of intrigue or adventure in the arid confines of her circumscribed world.

Hattie said lightly: "Oh, yes, indeed!"

"My goodness gracious!" Mrs. Doty marveled, and made a clicking noise with her tongue.

"But what on earth's Agatha going to do with a baby?" Mrs. Duncan demanded.

"Oh, I guess she can do as well as lots of people have done with theirs," Hattie snapped, and invoked a neat picture of the refractory Rose Duncan. "I've always said she was a born mother."

"She was almost a mother to her poor father," Cassie conceded.

"Besides, she was studying all the time she was waiting," Hattie boasted.

"Studying all the time—" came vaguely from Mrs. Duncan.

"Studying what, for the land's sake?"

Mrs. Doty was a mother by instinct, the only method she approved.

"Why, child sike— Well, something or other that teaches you how to care for babies—scientifically, you know."

Mrs. Doty cried with high incredulity: "Scientifically!"

"I shouldn't think you'd be any too pleased," Cassie hazarded. "All this extra work—"

"I'm pleased, if Agatha is," Hattie said tartly.

Cassie paid her out with: "She isn't changed by being in New York all these months. Wasn't that that serge I made her last year?"

"She didn't wear any of her new clothes. Traveling musses things so!" Hattie told her loftily.

"Where'd she get the baby?" Mrs. Duncan's voice was thin and tight.

"At some orphanage in New York."

"I should think she'd have taken an older child if she had to have any. She'll have to see this one through its second summer, and that's difficult."

"I guess she took the one she wanted," Hattie countered, and spent the next ten minutes parrying their thrusts. Then Agatha came back, empty bottle in hand, her young face drawn with fatigue.

"She was starved; she fell asleep right away." Myriad pressing details crowded her thoughts. She viewed the lingering trio with dismay. It occurred to her for the first time that they had come, not to see Hattie, but herself, a sort of official welcome home. "I'm sorry I had to run off, but I suppose a baby always does demand the center of the stage."

"You'll find it demands a good deal more'n that," Mrs. Doty predicted. "What'd you want a baby for, anyhow?"

"Association of ideas, I expect." She smiled and lifted the hair away from her forehead. "I'd pushed a wheel chair for so long—"

"Should think that'd be the very reason why you wouldn't want to push a baby carriage."

"Hattie says you took it from an orphanage." Mrs. Duncan's voice was pitched in a sort of church response key. "Are its parents dead?"

"Nobody knows. It was just left there."

"But if you don't know anything about it, it may not be legitimate," Mrs. Doty discovered excitedly.

"That's true," Agatha conceded.

"Well, I should certainly think you'd want to know *that*!"

"But how could I know? Besides, what difference would it make? The poor little baby can't help it if its parents weren't married."

Mrs. Doty gasped and looked at Mrs. Duncan. Hattie took advantage of the silence to ask, elbow deep in a suit case, "You want these blankets up in her room?"

"What's the baby's name, Agatha?" Mrs. Duncan inquired abruptly.

"She hasn't any yet. I think I shall call her Felice."

"What orphanage did you get it from?" This was Mrs. Duncan again.

"The Municipal—or the City Orphanage—some such name. Leave the blankets

there, Hattie." Her weary preoccupation was apparent now.

"Well," Mrs. Duncan said, and moved swiftly toward the door, "I must be going." She herded the other two with her eyes, but at the door Cassie turned back.

"I want to run in and see your new things, Agatha. I thought maybe I could get some ideas for Mis' Ferguson's black she's having turned."

They filed out, Mrs. Duncan in the lead. She walked very upright, with her eyes straight before her like a gaunt marionette. She said, "Good-by, Hattie—and Agatha!" without turning her head.

V

WITH the door closed, Agatha exhaled deeply. "I wonder whatever possessed those women to come here to-day, when they knew I'd just come home."

Hattie, on the floor beside a suit case, was squatting back on her heels. Her face was red, her mouth twitching angrily. "They just wanted to nose; Art told 'em about your bringing a baby home." She left it hanging there. Agatha saw her face stiffen. "My land!" She bounced to her feet. "Agatha Marley, those women—Agatha, you saw the way they acted! I thought that Doty woman had an evil look in her eyes! I believe—Agatha, they think—"

"What on earth—"

"They think it's yours! As sure as your born days they think that baby's yours. The cats!"

She stood there, galvanized by the awfulness of it, the sureness of it. Agatha stared back at her, taking it in slowly. Then she protested:

"Why, Hattie, what a thing to say!"

"I tell you they do. Now I come to think of it, I might 've seen it before. You should 've heard 'em pumping me when you were upstairs!"

"Think that I— Hattie, you're imagining things!"

"Do you think I'd imagine a thing like that? I tell you I'm sure of it. You saw the way they stared and looked at each other every once in awhile!"

"Think that I'm—"

"I know it!"

"Its mother!"

"What'd they come over here for in the first place?"

"Yes, I thought that was strange.

"They've never come here except to see father."

"Now, look here! You give me that orphan asylum paper! You know how that Doty woman and Cassie gossip." Battle smoldered in Hattie's bright eyes, a battle not entirely unwelcome. "You give me that paper, and I'll go over there before those others have gone. I'll nip it in the bud! Where's that paper?"

"Oh, no, Hattie!"

"I tell you—"

"But you can't do a thing like that. They may have thought no such thing."

"I couldn't be surer if they'd come out and said it! It'll be all over town before morning if—"

"Nonsense, Hattie!"

Hattie looked at her sharply. "You know you think so, too. I suppose they couldn't understand why you'd go and saddle yourself with another burden."

"Why, of course they couldn't understand," Agatha said, and laughed a little shrilly. "How could they? They don't know me. When they used to come here to see father, they never noticed me any more than they did the furniture. And now they'd believe a thing like that."

"They won't long. You give me that paper."

"Don't be foolish, Hattie!"

"Do you mean to say you'll let 'em go on thinking—"

"People have a right to think what they like," Agatha said firmly. "You can't just go over to those women and say, 'I know what you're thinking, and it isn't so!' That would be ridiculous." She walked swiftly across the room, avoiding the horrified eyes of her housekeeper. "Bring some of those things up when you come, will you?" She must have solitude, she told herself.

She went upstairs to the south room, where the baby lay asleep in the middle of a huge old four-poster. She stood in the doorway, looking at it. A slow, faint color came into her pale cheeks. Heavens! What a thing—Hers—Could it be possible they would think *that*? The corners of her mouth lifted in a half smile. Preposterous—and yet, when she sent her mind back over that scene—She started resolutely toward the bureau. She must empty the drawers for the baby's things. All over town, Hattie had said.

Hattie, downstairs, furiously pawing the

contents of the suit case, was stopped suddenly by a sound from the south room. A broken chord of song. Another—spirited and sweet. Some one singing. Agatha singing!

VI

THE Duncan place, an austere red house with an austere block of outlying red buildings, lay a quarter of a mile up a narrow dirt road from the Marley house. The three women covered the distance in silence—except for Cassie True, whose thoughts were always articulate. But since they walked single file, with Mrs. Duncan as captain, and the little dressmaker bringing up the rear; and since Mrs. Duncan's pace was that of a conscientious fire horse responding to an alarm, Cassie's thoughts dribbled harmlessly on the air.

However, it is probable that the same thought animated all three ladies; they all showed a singular reluctance to voice it once they had achieved the sanctity of the Duncan sitting room. Mrs. Duncan removed her hat and gloves, smoothed her hair, and motioned her guests to be seated. Then she walked with a sedate and thoughtful air to the window.

"Well!" she said at last.

This was entirely neutral and indefinite, but Mrs. Doty, who was of a peppery and impatient make-up, responded with, "Of all the funny things!"

Cassie made a noncommittal noise in her throat, and waited for a cue from Mrs. Duncan.

"It certainly does seem strange for a girl like Agatha Marley—" she began, but Mrs. Doty shrilled:

"Strange!" and laughed bitingly. "The idea of that girl—"

"After," Mrs. Duncan took her up reproachfully, "caring for her father all those years—"

"Taking a baby to bring up. Strange isn't the word."

"You wouldn't think she'd want to adopt a baby that's—"

But Mrs. Doty took the word from the pleasantly wandering Cassie, and tossed it boldly into the open. "Adopt!" she echoed.

Mrs. Duncan drew a long, luxurious sigh. "It certainly is hard to believe a thing like that of Agatha Marley, but—"

"Still water runs deep," chanted Mrs. Doty, and Cassie moaned ecstatically:

"My dear, do you really think—"

"She always was a queer, secretive sort of girl," Mrs. Doty recalled.

"I suppose she thinks we'll believe that silly story," Mrs. Duncan said, indignant at this reflection on her own sagacity.

Cassie's little eyes brightened, and she loosened the coat she had not been invited to remove. "I had the funniest feeling when Art told us about it this afternoon. I said to myself, why should a young woman like Agatha want to adopt a baby?"

But since she had also said it to Mrs. Duncan and Mrs. Doty, the repetition fell short of its anticipated effect. Still it gave Mrs. Doty a cue.

"If she adopted that baby, she's certainly forgotten the name of the orphan asylum in a hurry."

"It's possible she had forgotten," Mrs. Duncan said, backing water.

"You *know* you wouldn't forget a thing like that!" Mrs. Doty said accusingly. "You know that down in your heart you don't believe she got that baby from an orphanage!"

Mrs. Duncan capitulated. "I know it's a terrible thing to believe about any girl, but what else did Hattie Freer mean when she said that Agatha'd been studying all the time she'd been waiting!" There was a breathy gasp from her listeners, and she continued solemnly, severely, "And that's exactly what she did say—in so many words."

"I remember!" whispered Cassie.

"Come to think of it, so do I!" Mrs. Doty admitted, not a little awed.

"Of course she couldn't have realized what she was saying. It must have just slipped out," Mrs. Duncan excused Hattie, "but there it is! And then the way Agatha stumbled, and mumbled, and couldn't remember anything!"

"Do you remember when I said the baby looked rickety? Did you hear her say it hadn't been very strong—at first!"

"Well, I guess nearly everybody thought it was queer the way she went off so soon after her father's death like that," Cassie contributed.

"You heard what she said about illegitimate children! As though it didn't matter whether they were or not!"

"They say those kind are always brighter," Cassie mused happily.

"The idea!" Scornfully from Mrs. Doty, mother of five, all born in wedlock.

"Well, they do," Cassie persisted obstinately, nervously.

The awfulness of their discovery held them in silence for a moment, but no longer. The evidence was too lavish and too damning.

"Hattie's said right along what a fine time she was having in New York," Mrs. Doty said.

"She told me," Cassie remembered, "that Agatha had more beaux than she knew what to do with. I was glad, because you've got to admit she never had any fun when the professor was alive."

"Well, she won't have much now," Mrs. Doty said grimly.

"She looks better," Cassie decided, "a little plumper. I've always heard that—er—" and subsided under Mrs. Duncan's glare.

"We mustn't be too quick to judge," Mrs. Duncan admonished with tardy piety. "Plenty of women *have* adopted babies."

"Yes, but they generally know what they're getting," Mrs. Doty said, "and where they got it from."

"I've read a lot about maternal instinct lately," Cassie confessed. "It seems some women have it stronger than others."

"What right's an unmarried woman got to have maternal instinct," Mrs. Doty demanded triumphantly.

"It does seem, after taking care of an invalid for fifteen years, as though she wouldn't deliberately saddle herself with another care," Mrs. Duncan advanced.

"Think of her bringing it back here," Mrs. Doty fumed hotly.

"Well, after all, it's her home. Where else should she take it?" Cassie wanted to know.

"Well, if she thinks she can do a thing like that *here*, among decent people—"

"I'm afraid," Mrs. Duncan cut in, "that nobody else is going to believe that story any more than we did. It's bound to have a bad influence on the town."

"Well, I want to say right now that I don't think we ought to stand for it," and Mrs. Doty wagged her blond head fiercely.

"I don't see what we can do about it," Cassie said with a fervent hope that the others wouldn't either.

"We shall have to do something," Mrs. Duncan announced firmly, "if it's so. But we mustn't act too quickly. We mustn't judge her without giving her a chance to exonerate herself."

"Murder will out," Mrs. Doty consoled herself; and knew that in their hearts Agatha Marley had already been judged, tried, and found guilty.

VII

How they expected Agatha to exonerate herself, none of the ladies could have said with any clarity. Hattie's, indeed, was the only practical plan whereby the fungus of suspicion that was gathering about her darling might be dispelled. But Hattie required the orphan asylum paper for the execution of this plan, and Agatha obstinately—and inexplicably—withheld it.

On the whole, Agatha's attitude was incomprehensible to the devoted housekeeper. She was at one moment scornfully derisive, and at the next fretfully impatient. The more convinced Hattie became that her first terrible suspicion was justified, the more unaccountable was the girl's reaction. And Hattie was soon convinced. It was no later than the day following Agatha's return, that Hattie met Cassie True on Elm Street. Cassie had, of course, been sworn to secrecy and discretion. But Cassie was so constructed that she was incapable of exercising these splendid faculties. What went on inside Cassie was sure to be manifest on the outside. If Cassie suffered an attack of indigestion, the tip of her thin nose was sure to proclaim it to the world.

When she met and stopped Hattie, there was such tense and painful repression in her manner that Hattie was almost moved to alarm. "How's Agatha this morning?" she inquired in a semiwhisper. "It's so nice to—it's so nice to have her back—I mean after her being away so long and all. I wonder if she'd mind my running in to see her new things; I have to keep up-to-date in my work, of course, and it isn't often I—she won't be too terribly busy, will she? Oh, I meant to ask, how's the—er—how's the baby? Cunning little thing, isn't it?"

Hattie described that encounter to Agatha later: "Why, she could hardly talk, she was so flustered. And she kept smirking and wriggling. Why, it's as plain as day what she's thinking."

"Well, what do you care what she thinks, dear?"

"What do I care! She said she was going to drop in."

"Let her drop."

Hattie said sepulchrally: "Agatha, I'm

as sure as I can be that it's all over town already."

"Oh, no, Hattie! Do you think it is—really?"

"When I went into the drug store, Felix Crane asked me more questions!"

"Felix did!"

"He said he was coming up to say welcome home," Hattie said grimly. "What he's coming up for is to nose—like the rest."

"Well," Agatha said, intently studying her thumbnail, "let him come!"

"By the way," Hattie tossed off nonchalantly, "I hope you've put that orphan asylum paper away safe. I'll take care of it if you like."

"My goodness, Hattie! If you don't stop talking about that paper—"

It wasn't like Agatha to snap at a person like that. But New York *had* changed her, Hattie realized that now. Yesterday, when she had first come home, it hadn't been apparent. She had been tired and old memories had depressed her. But Hattie could see the change now. There was a sort of restrained buoyancy about her, and a new, misty shine in the bottom of her smoky gray eyes. When Hattie said: "You'll be the talk of Ellonvale if you don't nip this thing in the bud," she only said: "Nonsense, darlin'," and kissed her on the cheek.

Sure enough, Cassie True "dropped in" late that afternoon. Hattie was outraged. "She's just come to snoop," she fumed at Agatha, who was upstairs, preparing to transfer the contents of her trunk to the closet.

"That's good; she can snoop up here, and help me unpack and put my things away."

So Hattie sent Cassie up to Agatha's room. Their voices floated down to her where she was busy in the kitchen, Agatha's with that new, light-hearted note in it, the little dressmaker's a broken rumble interspersed at intervals with a high note of surprise or admiration—Hattie couldn't tell which. After half an hour of this, the doorbell jangled. Hattie thought: "Some more snoopers!" and went wrothly to the door. Her manner changed when she saw the tall figure on the porch.

"How do you do, Miss Freer? I wonder—you remember me?"

"Mr. Mason, isn't it? Step right in."

"I wonder if Miss Marley will see me for a moment?"

"I'm sure she will," Hattie told him, and led the way to the library.

She left him there and went upstairs, not without a grim satisfaction in breaking in on Cassie's snooping orgy. At the door of Agatha's room she stopped, her hard, plump hands going involuntarily to her breast. Agatha was standing before her mirror wearing something that was fashioned out of a material Hattie fancied was utilized only in lamp shades. While it was green on the outside, apple green, it was quite transparent, and underneath was something pinkish that followed the lines of her slender figure with almost shocking exactitude. The sleeves trailed down like wings to the hem of the skirt—which wasn't, after all, so far—and were slashed so that they displayed glimpses of Agatha's white arms from shoulder to wrist.

"Well, for goodness' sake—" Hattie began feebly and stopped.

"I'm just showing Cassie," Agatha said, "some of my new things. You haven't seen this tea gown, have you, dear? Pretty, don't you think?"

"It certainly is beautiful," Cassie breathed. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, hands bunched together in her lap, avid blue eyes bright and bulging like new marbles.

Agatha posed for them, twirling nonchalantly. "Like it, Hattie?"

Hattie gulped courageously, her gaze shifting from that resplendent figure to the awed face of the dressmaker.

"Why, yes," she conceded, and critically regarded the tea gown: "Chiffon, isn't it?"

"Georgette over satin," Agatha explained kindly.

"Don't she look wonderful in it—like a different person?" Cassie marveled covetously. She touched the stuff gingerly. "My goodness; it certainly is perishable! I suppose they wear things like that all the time in New York."

"Only for tea," Agatha told her, and flashed a wink at Hattie over Cassie's rusty black toque.

"I suppose they have afternoon tea regular," Cassie hazarded.

"Oh, yes, indeed."

Hattie, coming to with a start, announced: "Mr. Mason's downstairs, Agatha. He wants to see you."

"Andrew Mason!" The faint new color in Agatha's cheeks deepened. "You mean—he's downstairs now?" She made a nervous movement toward the fastening of her dress.

"That's that city man's been staying at the inn, isn't it?"

"Gracious, I must change my—"

"I s'pose he's come to tea," Cassie conjectured with gloomy relish, and got up reluctantly.

Agatha's groping fingers had located the hidden fastening, but now they dropped away. She cried, a little shrilly: "Goodness! I must powder my nose!" and rustled to the bureau. From a confusion of small bundles, still in the pristine condition in which they had left the shop, she selected a square box, and ripped off its outer wrappings. Immediately the room was full of an exotic, elusive scent. Cassie sniffed it in avidly, and stared with awful concentration while Agatha padded face and throat with a pink disk of thistledown. "You'll excuse me, won't you, Cassie? Come again!"

She left them standing there, Hattie a nice example of arrested animation, Cassie despondently staring. It was Cassie's sigh that aroused the housekeeper.

"Well, I must go. I s'pose she'll be wantin' you to get 'em tea."

Hattie's faculties began to function—beautifully. "Yes. It's lucky I made them cinnamon cookies yesterday." She made briskly for the door.

"New York," Cassie observed plaintively at her shoulder, "must be a wonderful place."

VIII

DOWNSTAIRS, riveted outside the library door, Agatha heard their steps in the upper hall. The momentum of that reckless impulse had carried her thus far and left her stranded there in a scorching flame of a new self-consciousness. She was waiting only for the two women to leave her a clear passage so that she might fly back for the comforting and unrevealing security of the familiar serge, when she realized that the steps and voices, instead of diminishing, were approaching. In the flush of her triumph, Hattie was conducting the little dressmaker down the front stairs. With a smothered gasp she turned the knob of the library door, and plunged inside.

Andrew Mason was standing on the rug before the fireplace with his hands clasped behind his back, a tall young man, in expensive, crumpled tweeds, and with the urbane informality of the well traveled and well read. The afternoon sun had strug-

gled valiantly through the heavy chenille curtains of the west window, and lay in a pale pool at his feet. It was this that had drawn him to the hearth; for it was a somber place, that library, heavy and somber. Dull-toned books on abstract and profound subjects lined three of the four walls. In one corner was a wheel chair, the varnish worn off its arms, the seat sagging. The rest of the furniture was massive, grim. It was a grim room, altogether stale and murmurous with memories, a room to which a man unconsciously adapts his mood.

Andrew had done that, had abandoned himself to thoughts of the late Professor Marley and the projected biography, when the apparition appeared which swept this discreet foothold from under him.

"This is Mr. Mason?" Agatha was saying politely.

Andrew floundered toward her, where she was flattened against the door like an impaled butterfly. "Ah—er—yes. I was waiting to see Miss Marley. I—"

"I'm Agatha Marley."

Oh, no! Not possibly—not this radiance and dazzle. He'd seen her once, the professor's daughter, a pallid little soul, the devoted, self-sacrificing type, invariably spoken of with pity.

He bowed and murmured that he was glad to see her—again. He said he remembered meeting her a long time ago—or was it her sister he had met? Then he shifted his gaze resolutely to the likeness in oil of Professor Marley that hung above the mantel.

"Doubtless your father's publishers have written you with regard to the proposed biography."

"They did," Agatha said, "now that I recall, write me something about it."

"My father," Andrew told her, "was, as you may know, one of Professor Marley's warmest admirers. It's really he who has gathered most of the material for the book."

"Indeed," Agatha said. She was still standing, and he went back to the hearth rug and regarded the pendent professor solemnly.

"This is an interesting picture," he observed, "very interesting. Was it done recently?"

"Fairly so."

From the picture his eyes pivoted to the wheel chair. "And his chair; I see you still keep it in its accustomed place."

Agatha's glance followed his. She said "yes" quietly, and Andrew's eyes lighting happily on the books, he said, "And this is his library, I suppose."

Once more Agatha said, "Yes." She knew that she was going out like a candle in a breeze. That feeble flare of ego which had quickened for a moment could not survive if he persisted in that disinterment.

"I understand his long invalidism did not affect his—er—mental energies in the least."

"Not in the least," Agatha assured him in a small, tired voice.

"I met him only once," Andrew said, and saw with relief that she was about to sit down in the chair nearest the door. "It was some ten or twelve years ago. As I remember, he received my father and me in the garden—a sort of arbor."

"Will you sit down?"

"Thanks!" Gratefully he sat. "I think it was an arbor. I know I was deeply impressed. I suppose, without exaggeration, your father was one of America's greatest scientists."

She was quite snuffed out by now, overwhelmingly conscious of the revealing splendor of the winged tea gown. He would think her mad, she decided, in a dress like this! She heard his voice:

"And that's the sort of thing I should like to get from you—the intimate side of his character."

She was about to answer when a couple of light taps sounded on the door, and Hattie came in. On her spread arms she bore a tea tray—the best silver tea tray. Huddled upon it was the best tea set, eggshell cups and saucers, dime thin slices of lemon, a pyramid of little cakes.

"Tea, Miss Agatha," announced Hattie demurely. "Shall I set it here?" and drew up a small table. "Hadn't I better put a match to this fire; it's all laid?" She hovered, match in hand, panting ever so little.

"Why, yes—thanks," Agatha managed.

"Well, that would be jolly!" Andrew Mason enthused.

Hattie tinderred the fire, and the flames leaped up gratefully. "I brought lemon and cream," she announced happily, and hung for a moment over the tray that Agatha might observe her apron, the embroidered one with the bib.

"That will be all, thank you, Hattie."

And now Andrew succumbed; shamelessly and utterly he abandoned the professor.

He hitched his chair forward, drew a long breath, and rested his delighted and admiring gaze on the vision behind the tea tray. Agatha dropped her eyes, but not before they had quaffed a heady draft, and asked:

"Do you take lemon or cream?"

"Cream, if I may. Absurd; isn't it? I contracted the habit in England."

"Oh, England!" The tea table served as a sort of moral bulwark. Pouring the lovely amber liquid into the fragile cups, the sleeve of the green tea gown became a spread, translucent wing. The firelight found the bent head with its massed, heavy hair, and frolicked there. "I've always wanted to go to England. Were you there long?"

"Ten years," Andrew boasted.

"How you must have loved it!"

"Ah!" he said, and accepted tea and a cake. Glowingly he polished his memories of England. Never had he seen such a blend of Victorian femininity and ravishing modernity. The dress, of course, was the modern note. The Victorian touch was in the hair—waist-long, he conjectured—and the shy smile and fluctuating color. "You'd love London," he told her.

"You make it sound as fascinating as I've always pictured it," she said, and passed him the cake. His eyes were nourishing her—rain on a parched flower. "I've never traveled."

"No, of course not." His face sobered. "With your father to care for."

With a jealous uprush that surprised her, she dragged him away from that with, "But I mean to—soon—Paris—London—all over."

"Your housekeeper tells me," he said, "that you've just returned from New York."

"Yes, I've been there for some time."

"I wish I'd known it," he deplored. "I should like to have had my sister call on you and—and I might have had the pleasure of seeing you there."

"That would have been nice," Agatha said, and called, "Come!" in response to another tap on the door.

Hattie appeared like a plump jinni, and announced: "Mr. Crane."

Mr. Crane loomed in the doorway, and stopped there abruptly while the words of greeting that had been launched in a loud, hearty voice limped into port, very small craft indeed.

"Why, Felix!" Agatha cried cordially. "Come in!"

Felix came, propelled gently by Hattie's determined elbow. She told Agatha, "I'll bring another cup."

Felix Crane was a big, young man, with substantial feet and hands, given to checks and stripes and audible ties. Something of a wag and a punster was Felix at his best; something of a gallant, too.

"How nice it is to see you again," Agatha rejoiced, and offered him her hand across the tea tray.

He took it awkwardly, a little fearfully. "Just thought I'd run up and say 'howdy.' Glad to see you back."

"And I'm glad to be back! Mr. Mason, Felix is an old friend—or have you two met?"

Felix said they hadn't, and pumped Andrew's hand shortly.

"Just bring that chair up, Felix, and sit down. You'll have tea, of course."

Felix obeyed. Afternoon tea in Ellonvale! Agatha Marley diaphanously winged! Agatha Marley looking like something off a magazine cover!

"Mr. Mason has just been telling me about England. What a lovely place it is!"

"Never been there myself," Felix said. "How'd you like little old New York, Agatha?" The question disposed of London—and Andrew.

"I'll wager Miss Marley feels pretty much as I do about the metropolis," Andrew hazarded pleasantly. "Frightful jumble, don't you think?"

"I'm afraid I did feel that way about it," she confessed, and smiled back into his eyes.

"Some town," Felix boomed, "just the same! Something doing every minute, eh Agatha?"

"That is true, Felix."

"Now this little village—charming," Andrew declared. "So simple and unspoiled."

"It is sweet," Agatha agreed.

"Dead hole, though. If you mentioned the Charleston, they'd think you meant the city, wouldn't they, Agatha?"

"I'm afraid they would," she said. "I suppose Mr. Mason finds the quiet splendid for his work, though."

"Ideal!" Andrew cried.

"And how is business, Felix?"

"Oh, fine! Just fine!" Felix expanded upon the subject of the drug store. "I'm

making improvements right along. Ordered a new soda fountain just yesterday—last word in soda fountains, too." He thought, "Wonder where she picked up the sissy highbrow?" "Takes a live wire to run a drug store these days!" he told them.

Andrew, smoking easily, a benignant smile on his lips, reflected upon the kind bounty that made live wires tolerable to lovely young women.

IX

AGATHA was perfectly aware of a primeval current of rivalry in the air. She warmed to it, tingled to it. Half buried in the big chair, she beamed impartially upon them. The shadows in the old room retreated under the brazen assault of the fire-light, and the neglected professor frowned down upon the unconscious trio resentfully.

Hattie, upstairs—sans the embroidered apron—was giving the baby its evening tub. The baby crowed, and sucked its toes and the soap, and she chided it rapturously. Voices floated up to her, gay, contented, the clink of cups and spoons, and the beguiling aroma of cigarette smoke.

Contentment shone on Hattie's pink, plump face, and in her eyes glowed a deep resolve. That resolve was not more than two hours old. It dated, in fact, from the moment when she had seen Cassie True's face in Agatha's room, the awed admiration and envy in the little dressmaker's eyes. Fervently she regretted the alarms with which she had beset Agatha; fervently hoped that they had taken no root. For Hattie had firmly resolved to make no further effort to clear her darling's name. Not she! Not now!

She was tucking the baby into bed when she heard the front door close, and Agatha's flying feet on the stairs. She came into the improvised nursery, a living defiant irradiation.

"Well!" challenged Hattie.

And, "Well!" Agatha echoed softly. They measured each other, each cuddling her own triumph.

"They gone?" Hattie uselessly inquired.

Agatha said, "Yes," and then swiftly, "We must get that old wheel chair up in the attic. When Jim comes up to do the chores, ask him to move it for us, will you?"

"Yes, dear."

"And that picture. I want it taken down."

"Your father's painting!"

"It's too dark, much too dark," Agatha said firmly. "I think I'll put that Birth of Venus that's in my room, up there. And Hattie, we must get some chintz for those windows in the library. They'll brighten the place up."

"All right, dear," Hattie agreed meekly. "Did you notice Cassie True's eyes when she saw you in that dress?"

"Cassie's eyes?" Agatha repeated artlessly. "Why?"

"They were bulging," Hattie caroled. "I thought they'd pop right out of her head."

"Dear me," marveled Agatha, doing needless things to the baby's blankets.

"Yesser! By this time everybody knows all about it, too—and about Mr. Mason coming, and likely as not she ran into Felix Crane on his way up here. You mark my words, it'll be all over town!"

Agatha heard her with a deep, indrawn breath that sent a tremor through her glowing body that was like a caress. She spread a green gossamer wing and flexed it softly across the baby's face, and she said wistfully: "But—after all—it's such a small town, Hattie!"

X

HATTIE was right. Cassie's graphic tale—and Cassie was no mean raconteur—was writ large on the village log before night. It lent tangible substance to the cloud of mystery and suspicion that was gathering about the stately Marley house. Ellonvale was naturally distrustful of innovations. Afternoon tea and tea gowns were undeniably innovations. Where the erstwhile mouselike and nondescript daughter of Professor Marley was concerned, they were sinister innovations indeed.

Even so, the thickening cloud of scandal was still nebulous. A chaste mind could profess to ignore it, and thus still make a first-hand investigation without fear of criticism. It was directly after Cassie's unmitigated account of the tea and gown that Ellonvale roused to its duty toward the late professor's daughter. It is probable that Ellonvale had never before considered the professor's daughter as a separate entity. But who notices the moon when the sun is high?

Ellonvale called upon Agatha. Ellonvale "dropped in" to welcome Agatha home. Ellonvale came to inquire as to Agatha's

health, to discuss the wording on her father's memorial, to present her with a half grown puppy or a dozen new laid eggs. A less ingenious element—mostly masculine—inadvertently finding itself in the neighborhood, just plunged airily in on the wave of a friendly impulse.

They were all delighted to see her back. So many of them had just heard of her return, or in passing the house had seen the shades up and old Jim working about the grounds. None of them evidently had seen the brand new perambulator which stood habitually in the brightest spot of sunlight at one end of the broad porch. None of them evidently had heard about the baby to judge by their amazement when it was mentioned. Once this happened, however, they were all bright, eager interest. "Well, well, well! A baby, eh? And how's ikky toodles? Hey? Kitchy, kitchy!"

Agatha was not a little surprised therefore when Rose Duncan boldly deviated from the accepted order and demanded: "Let's see the infant, Agatha!"

Rose had been in the Marley house exactly three minutes. Hattie had, of course, prepared Agatha for Rose, for the expanse of stocking and rouge, but not for the clear, unwavering, disconcerting appraisal of those young brown eyes. It was this that had reduced Agatha in those three minutes almost to a state of terror. Gratefully she turned and led the way upstairs, with Rose at her heels, swinging her school books.

"We've just brought her in—if you want to come up."

In the sunny south room Rose stood beside the big bed and regarded the rosy and quiescent infant, and swung her books thoughtfully.

"For Pete's sake! Funny looking morsel, isn't it?"

Agatha said, a little nettled: "It's a sweet baby, Rose."

"Oh, of course, you'd think so," Rose excused her weakness, and patted her hand kindly. "My dear, that's a precious frock you're wearing!"

"I'm glad you like it."

"I do," Rose emphatically assured her. "And how marvelous you look! I used to think you were a total loss, and here you are the belle of the ball—well!" She sighed, and shouldered her books again, her eyes drifting to the baby. "Doesn't look a bit like you," she announced judiciously. "Lucky, isn't it?"

Agatha, taken off guard, was held hypnotized by the genial impeachment in those frank young eyes. Then she felt a comradely touch on her shoulder.

"I've got to foot it! Mother 'd skin me alive; of course she's forbidden me the house. Next time I'll stay longer, got a lot of things to ask you." She achieved the door, turned back to say reassuringly: "Don't let 'em bully you! I'm with you, you know."

"What," Hattie asked from the foot of the stairs when she heard the front door slam, "did that little chit want?"

"Oh, nothing," Agatha told her lightly, and went swiftly into her own room and closed the door.

She had it now, raw, unmistakably, the truth! Hattie had been right. They believed it! Out of the shadows figures came and grouped themselves about her, lovely ladies, lost ladies, scarlet, unrepentant, beautiful, always beautiful. They welcomed her with sinuous gestures and slow, enticing smiles. They bore in their perfumed arms a lovely scarlet cloak, and she donned it with the passionate eagerness of an obscure young understudy to whom chance has allotted the stellar rôle for one glorious night.

Hattie came galloping up the stairs and into the room. In her arms she cuddled a box—a bulky box swathed in white and girdled with gilt cord. "This just came from Crane's drug store!"

Agatha swooped upon it, and tore at the string. "Candy! Tons of candy!"

"My land, so it is!"

"From Felix." She dragged a card out of its envelope. "Sweets to the sweet!" penned Felix gallantly, and Agatha swayed with mirth.

"Let's see," demanded Hattie; and:

"My land! Must be five pounds."

"Wasn't it generous of him? Try one, dear."

Hattie selected one, and said slyly: "Thought you never liked Felix Crane, Agatha."

"My dear, I may not have liked the cut of his coat, or his ties, but as for the gentleman himself—I've never known him in this guise before."

"Well, now you do," Hattie gloated. "I guess when he saw you in that tea gown—"

"So you think it was the tea gown," Agatha said, and laughed again softly.

"You don't suppose he'd—er—heard the rumors about me, do you?"

Hattie, frightened, disposed of all rumor in a sweep of her plump arm. "My land, Agatha! You didn't put any stock in—My goodness! That was just my foolishness." And she went, humming carelessly, into the south room.

XI

FELIX's candy was followed that evening by Felix himself, frankly in festive regalia, and very dapper and bright he was. Felix had been openly incredulous when the first "You know what they're saying about Agatha Marley!" had reached him. "What! Agatha Marley!" he had roared. But it was the very preposterousness of the story that had lured him. He had been so sure of its fallacy, and after that first visit he had not been quite so sure. Felix's was a nature that dislikes all uncertainty. Uncertainties irritated him. Things either were or were not. But in Agatha's case it was not so simple to reach a decision.

Agatha Marley had always been an unknown quantity in the town. He began to think that perhaps this was so because the town hadn't taken the trouble to know her. So Felix decided to take the trouble, and was completely mystified. This gracious and supple creature was not the Agatha Marley he had been accustomed to see behind the professor's wheel chair, nor sitting beside it transcribing his profundities. But neither was she the woman to fit into the frame that rumor had fashioned.

All through his second visit he had puzzled and fumed—fumed because he had no sooner lighted his first cigarette than Andrew Mason had appeared. Andrew's unexpected presence had of course balked all attempt at research, and when Felix left he was not only mystified and enslaved, but raging as well.

Agatha, who had gone down to greet her guests with uneasy palpitations, had thought: "I ought to be able to talk my rôle." But she realized shortly that she need have no qualms on this score. Her callers hung upon her words, were they ever so commonplace. In admiring eyes and courtly gestures she found rich inspiration. There was reassurance, too, in the feel of the Chinese blue velvet frock she had thought she should never have the courage to wear.

Andrew Mason wrote to his sister that night that he had found "the quaintest bit of femininity you can imagine! No more like my recollections of her than a tooth-paste advertisement is like a Botticelli. She has all the charms of the new woman—and the old, and the faults of neither. You may conclude that I'm fastened to the place indefinitely. I can do the book here as well as anywhere—better! A few extra unmentionables and shirts would be welcome if you'll ship them along."

Winter crept swiftly, stealthily upon the village. By the time the first pond was frozen over, the hazy nebula of suspicion hanging over Agatha Marley had crystallized into a very definite taboo. There was no doubt in Ellonvale's mind now. Agatha had failed to exonerate herself. Not only that, but after that first feeble effort to foist her implausible story upon them she had quite brazenly abandoned it, just as she had abandoned the chaste garments in which they had always known her and with which she had hoped to mislead them. Failing this, she had resumed the exotic and gorgeous raiment that doubtless she had affected during her stay in the metropolis.

The definite taboo had one disadvantage. It kept the village away. The curious must content themselves now with curtain-shrouded glimpses of the erring Agatha, richly befurred or daringly sport-modeled, swinging along beside the protective bulk of the writing man from New York. Her perfidy, they secretly acknowledged, became the late professor's daughter. In this vivid and glowing young creature they could find no resemblance to the drab and dutiful picture of their memories. And she bore her ostracism with disconcerting calm.

Not that it was ostracism exactly. There were still those, of course, who ignored the taboo. Mainly they were of the masculine persuasion, notably Andrew Mason and Felix Crane and the jitney driver, who was also general deliverer of express packages, and who had added considerably to his savings account since Agatha's return via this agency. Then there was Mrs. Duncan, whose responsibility toward the community urged that she keep in touch with the condemned—and there was Cassie! Cassie, who could no more resist the iniquitous lure of that forbidden house than a hungry mouse could resist the cheese in a trap—though he knew it to be a trap!

But Cassie's deflections were indulgently tolerated, principally because it was Cassie who supplied the bright jewels which the weeks were stringing into a splendid scandal. It was from Cassie that they learned of the removal of the sacred wheel chair and the professor's portrait; Cassie who told them of the intrusion of bizarre chintz into the solemnity of the library. Without Cassie, how should they have known of the perfume atomizer, and bath salts, and the pink negligee fresh from a New York shop, edged with feathers! All these zestful heresies against the established order Cassie retailed. And as the supply grew, there grew also in the village a sense—a sureness—of impending excitement.

That this was traceable, in part at least, to Agatha herself, they could not know. But Agatha trod the light but uneasy step of a joyous impostor, whose Nemesis had already foreshadowed his approach. And the name of that Nemesis was Rose Duncan. Rose, after that first illuminating visit, had continued to come. True, her visits were brief—five minutes snatched on her way home from school. But Rose was no disciple of the town's creed of reticence and caution.

Innuendo and subterfuge, to Rose's mind, were tools for the debilitated and infirm. Rose was intent upon putting words to something that could survive words no more than a Japanese spaniel could survive the attack of an earnest mastiff. Agatha conceived a very real terror of those flying visits. She blanched under the cool, admiring scrutiny of those young eyes, the staccato chatter, the assumption of a secret *camaraderie*.

"Do tell her I'm busy, next time she comes," she entreated Hattie. So it was that Hattie, on a chilly December day, when she went in response to a knock at the kitchen door and found Rose blooming on the sill like an eager young seedling, announced: "Agatha's busy right now, Rose."

"Oh, well, I'll wait till she's not."

"She's feeding the baby," Hattie explained, planted in the doorway, "and it takes some time."

"Well, even a baby can't eat all day." Rose sidled adroitly into the kitchen. "I'll wait."

"I guess you'll wait some time," Hattie announced acidly.

Rose regarded with amusement the apo-

plectic tinge in the housekeeper's cheeks. "I never was bright enough to take a hint," she confessed dryly. "I wish you'd tell Agatha I want to see her—about something important. Will you? I'll roll into the library and wait."

XII

WHEN Agatha came briskly downstairs a few moments later, Rose greeted her cordially from the center of the Chesterfield. "H'lo, how's the *hinfant*?" She patted the place beside her invitingly. "Sit down here. I cut physics 'specially so I could have a decent chat with you."

Agatha, still standing, chided her gravely. "But you shouldn't cut your classes, should you, Rose?" And suddenly found Rose's eyes on her, cynical, dancing.

"Now that you've got that off your chest, maybe it'll begin to heal," she said, and bent forward abruptly to peer first at the hall door, and then, still amused, into Agatha's face. "Say, listen, Agatha! There's not a soul out front—and we've got the stage all to ourselves, so why strut your stuff for me?"

Agatha sat down at the other end of the Chesterfield, making noncommittal sounds in her throat, and a fussy business of disposing her skirts. She said imperiously: "Rose, my dear, don't you know you're much too young to—er—to talk like that!"

"Good gosh!" Rose grumbled, disgusted. "We won't get anywhere on *this* flat tire." She reached for her bag. From it she took a pack of cigarettes and a small folder of matches. "Get this! I never was a backward child, and you needn't be afraid of corrupting me, my dear." She lit her cigarette gravely. "I've been making a study of Freud and Havelock Ellis and Ellen Key since I was twelve; of course they're passé now, but they served their purpose." She blew a smoke ring and fixed Agatha with a friendly and candid stare. "I'm just telling you this so you won't pull any more pulpit stuff. What I *really* came to tell you was that you had been elected honorary president of the Ellonvale Branch of the Worldwide League for the Liberation of Women." She paused, her young chest swelling a little, and flashed a sidewise glance at her hostess. "We elected you last evening at our monthly meeting."

Agatha, bewildered and wordless, cried: "Honorary president! You elected me! But I—"

"The office doesn't entail any obligations—as the 'ads' say. But we *did* hope that you might address the December meeting. Will you?"

"Address the—you mean speak—but good gracious! Why should I—"

"You'd be a riot, you know," Rose urged her eagerly. "At present you're the most talked of woman in the place, and it's always best to strike while the iron's hot."

Agatha stammered: "I'm the most talked of woman in—"

"Last night," Rose told her, "the chairman referred to you as a beacon to your groping sisters. Not bad, what? And I read a paper on you, and maybe it wasn't a wow!"

"What," Agatha asked thinly, "was a wow?"

"My paper." Rose got up, extended the hand in which her cigarette still smoldered, and addressed the glowing tip. "The most gratifying example that has been brought to our notice of the diminishing power of man made laws and the growing determination of women to rebel against the bonds that stunt their souls even as the barbaric Chinese bind and stunt the feet of their helpless females!" She held her pose, and explained over her shoulder. "That's a little florid, I know, but it's what they like, isn't it? It went over fine, too."

Agatha realized suddenly that this was doubtless the voice and the language of the new world, the new generation, that which had eluded and bewildered her in New York. She said with artful nonchalance: "So that is what you said in your paper. You—er—you discuss these things quite openly at your club, then?"

"That's what the league's for," Rose told her, and resumed her clubroom pose. "I pointed your case out as being most significant because you had proved so conclusively the futility of unnatural repression when it is brought face to face with a great, human emotion like the maternal instinct! I said that you had proved that the beauty and grandeur of motherhood is great enough to neutralize all the sordid traditions that accrue to the mother who bears her child out of wedlock." She abandoned her pose and became conversational. "I stressed that, you see, because that's one of the things we are working for; to change the attitude of mind of women who have children without being married. If they could be made to look upon their—

er—transgression as a great achievement instead of a sin, they'd change public opinion. What did you say?"

"Nothing," Agatha assured her. "That is—well, nothing."

"As an achievement—where was I? Oh, yes. The right attitude of mind—you see, we had rather a disappointing experience last year. There was a servant girl back in the country, and her employer—a regular Old Testament farmer, he was—put her out. We hunted her up and talked to her, and tried to make her see what a splendid thing she was doing. We told her that motherhood was the primeval duty of her race, but that old farmer had made her think that she had sinned; and we couldn't get her to see the thing in its proper light. All she was interested in was getting the man to marry her—what?"

"I said," Agatha explained slowly, "that perhaps you couldn't blame her for that."

"Well, I suppose not," Rose conceded, "in a person of that type. Although we pointed out to her that a man of that type wouldn't be likely to make a fit parent for her child. A man who'd take advantage—"

Agatha got up and went to the window. "I think it's a little stuffy in here," she apologized, and lifted the sash.

"Perhaps it is." Rose pressed out her cigarette. "You see, you're such a splendid—er—demonstration of our theories, because of the brave attitude you've taken regarding your baby. You've realized that maternity is a sacred right, and defied public opinion."

"Oh, you—you realize that, do you?"

"We think it's magnificent," Rose said warmly. "And the way it has matured you and improved you, physically and socially, as well as—"

"Socially?"

"Well, as far as men are concerned," Rose qualified. "And, after all, that's all we care about. But it was bound to make you popular with them."

"Oh, was it?"

"Of course. Any boob knows that men admire a woman who has had the courage to live her own life better than the—than the goody-goods. It's natural that they should. It rounds her out, makes her broader and more sympathetic; that's a matter of record."

"Is it?" Agatha asked.

"My child, look at Du Barry and—"

and George Eliot, and George Sand! Women who don't try to repress the most natural instinct known to human nature, and yet are reluctant to bind themselves to the ball and chain of matrimony—"

She was addressing an audience again, but Agatha interrupted to inquire politely: "Then your—your club doesn't believe in marriage?"

"Where it's possible and convenient, we do," Rose admitted judicially. "But my dear, there are three women to every man in this State alone, as statistics prove. Well, every woman, then, can't get married, and yet every woman is a potential mother. Nature doesn't remain idle until a woman has acquired a marriage certificate, does she?"

Agatha, a picture of grave consideration, said: "I suppose not."

"Of course not," emphatically stated Rose. "And yet look at the price women used to pay if they listened to the voice of nature without first listening to the voice of the clergyman."

"Used to pay," echoed Agatha. "You mean that now—"

"Well, some of 'em do still," Rose conceded; "but that's because they don't get the right psychological slant on the thing. They try to hide what they've done. That's what makes you so unique. You didn't—except at first, of course. What did you do that for?"

"Why—why, I—"

"You didn't expect," Rose said impatiently, really preferring her own voice to any one's else, "anybody to believe that adopted story of yours!"

"But I did—really," Agatha confessed.

"My dear, it might have worked once—before it grew whiskers. Every betrayed girl since the beginning of time has pulled it until now it's in the same class with the sick friend." She glanced at the clock, and rose hastily. "Gosh! I'll have to step. Look here, Agatha, you will address the club, won't you?"

Agatha, who had risen, too, backed away perceptibly. "Oh, no! No, I'm afraid I couldn't do that."

"It's really your duty," Rose told her severely, "to tell your story to the world." Her voice lifted on wings of sudden inspiration. "You might give me the facts, and I'd write your speech for you."

"You—you would do that?"

"Well," Rose demurred modestly, "I'm

not bad at that sort of thing, and while, of course, I haven't had the practical experience you have, I think I could treat of it sort of professionally, if you get what I mean."

"Yes," Agatha told her, "I think I do. You are—well, you are 'up' on the subject, aren't you?"

"My dear, it's the only subject to be up on these days. I've analyzed every case I ever heard of."

"And have you heard of many?"

"Oodles," Rose said complacently, and made for the door. "You know that more and more women are refusing to go starved and barren through life. More and more they are abolishing the double standard, and claiming the right to live their lives as freely and as fully as a man—that's a good line for your speech," she said; "old, of course, but it'll sound new, coming from you." She was probing her bag for her powder puff. "By the way, the motto of our league is 'Down with the double standard,' in case—"

"I see," Agatha interrupted gravely. "What you're for—I mean, what *you* want is—is the *single* standard!" It left her panting a little, but Rose at once demanded impatiently:

"Are women to remain slaves!"

"Certainly not!" Agatha cried indignantly. "Assuredly not!"

"Then we must abolish the unwritten law that grants men privileges it denies women. There must be a single standard of conduct."

"Oh, *that's* what you me—I mean, that's an excellent way of putting it; so clear and—and concise."

Rose was invoking another layer of chalk from a singularly dingy compact. Now she applied it diligently, peered up and down the road to ascertain that she was unobserved. "Not that I care particularly," she told Agatha. "They'd all be here if they dared. Think over that speech business. I'll do all I can to help." She drifted down the steps airily. "See you sooner! Toodle-oo!"

XIII

AGATHA closed the door softly, and as softly went upstairs to her room. She hoped, fervently, that Hattie would not follow her. She felt oddly hollow—collapsible—and a little afraid. She felt like a person who had bought a pet lizard, and

discovered later that the thing was a crocodile. Rose had undoubtedly made her lovely, harmless little lizard look like a crocodile.

In her room, she propped herself against the back of a winged chair, and waited for her vision to clear and her pulse to return to normal. Her eyes were fixed on the window and the stretch of winter bitten landscape beyond. But though she saw the tall figure come swinging up the path, he was out of her range of vision before she realized that it was Andrew Mason. Involuntarily, then, her hands flew to her cheeks to quell the hot tempest rising there, but she made no move when Hattie's voice came cheerfully ringing up the stairs. "All right—one minute!" she called over her shoulder.

A new, a terrible self-awareness pervaded her. Rose had invested the scarlet cloak with startling reality. She found herself wondering, perhaps for the first time, what Andrew Mason knew, what he thought. Certainly there were two worlds—that which Rose represented, and the passive and circumscribed sphere in which she had spent her life. To which of these did Andrew belong? If he had heard, as it seemed he must, what were his thoughts of her?

The question rose clear of the whirling kaleidoscope that Rose had made of her mind. Dimly she knew that she had believed him beyond the reach of village gossip—and yet, perhaps he had not been. Perhaps he had heard.

In a panic of dismay she began tugging off her dress, flung into her closet. But today she chose none of those resplendent garments over which Ellonvale had gaped and fluttered. Instead, she reached for a simple sheath of gray with creamy scrawls of lace at the throat and wrists. Into this she clambered, already feverishly constructing the subtle cross-examination to which the unsuspecting Andrew was presently to be subjected.

When she greeted him, her color was high and hot, and she could not meet his eyes.

"Found this in your letter box," he announced, while their hands were still locked.

She released hers and took the letter from him. She saw the name of the orphanage in a corner of the envelope, wondered if he had seen it, too, and laid it face down on the table. "Sit down. Hattie will bring us tea."

"I like you in that dress," he said, brooding happily over her. "It—it goes with you, somehow."

"I'm glad you like it." She busied herself with the tea table, removing some books, finding an ash tray. "And how's the book coming along?"

"The—oh, fine! Thanks to you."

"I've had very little to do with it, I'm afraid."

"You'd everything to do with it," he declared warmly, and drew up a chair while Hattie disposed of the tea things. Agatha filled an awkward hiatus with tinkle of cups and spoons.

When she handed him his cup, she said, elaborately casual: "How have you liked living in—in a little place like Ellonvale—I mean—"

"I've never been happier," he said with a fervor that made her tingle.

"I should think—after New York—you would find it dull."

"Dull!"

"Well, I suppose it's amusing you, too. There are some quaint characters here. Sometimes they—they get ideas that are amusing."

"I like 'em," he told her. "I feel quite a native. Why, I'm as thrilled as they are over the latest bit of gossip."

She caught at her breath—and the word—sharply. "Oh, gossip! Of course a little place like this can't exist without it."

"Of course not," he chuckled.

"The least thing that happens in a place like Ellonvale—anything, I mean, that's the least bit out of the ordinary—becomes food for gossip."

Rapt eyes on the head bent over her teacup like a breeze bent flower, he agreed: "They have to talk about something, and I suppose very little happens that's worth talking about."

"For that reason," she said arduously, "they're apt to make mountains out of molehills. I mean they're apt to—to misconstrue things."

"It's the old story of people misinterpreting things they can't understand," he said easily.

The tension that held her relaxed a little, but still she did not dare lift her eyes. "That's it, of course," she said, and tried to laugh lightly. "You may imagine that they don't understand me."

"The lovely thing is that you *do* understand them," he smiled. "A lot of women

would find their chatter very annoying, but one would think that you weren't even aware of it."

"But I am aware of it," she confessed, and concentrated on a golden triangle of toast, "although it doesn't annoy me—much. Sometimes, of course—well, you see, ever since I brought the baby home—there has—"

He saw now to what she was drifting, and said soothingly, "You couldn't expect to do an unconventional thing like that without causing talk."

Now she looked up at him, fleetingly. "Oh, then you knew—it had caused—talk?"

He laughed. She was burning up, but enormously relieved. "I told you I had become a regular native," he reminded her.

"I suppose it did seem unconventional to them, and they couldn't understand, after my nursing father all those years—"

"They couldn't understand how some women find their greatest happiness in sacrifice," he broke in very gently. "And yet that's the very thing that makes you so wonderful, Agatha. That's the thing that has held me from the first. When I'd been here a few days and saw what you were facing—that bombardment of gossip and criticism—how serenely you took it! Do you know, I think it's the bravest thing I've ever known."

"Brave?" she whispered.

"Magnificent!" he enthused. "I don't think many women could have managed the situation as successfully as you've done. They'd have tried to explain—"

"Then you think I was right not to—"

"The minute you try to explain a beautiful and natural impulse like that, you rob it of some of its dignity and beauty." It infuriated him that the sordid tale had reached her; might tinge her lovely naïveté. "Look here, you're not going to let this worry you. Why, ever since the beginning of time, pioneers have had to suffer from public opinion—and you're a pioneer out here among a group of Old Testament minds." Agatha started violently. "Anything that doesn't subscribe to a set formula, they suspect. They don't stop to remember that the ruling influence in the world is the maternal instinct, or they'd understand quickly enough."

He took an indignant swallow of tea. Agatha, fresh from that interview with Rose, was not a little proud of her compos-

ure, though she felt distinctly giddy and feverish.

"Then you think it was a—a perfectly n-natural thing for me to do—" she began, and he broke in impatiently:

"If a lot of these idle women out here would go and do likewise, they'd be a lot better off."

"Oh, do you think so?" Agatha asked brightly.

"Emphatically," he said. "Give 'em something to do, something to think about—something to make 'em broader and more sympathetic."

Agatha recognized that, too, and was ready with a retort: "I understand the new woman is claiming the right to live her life as—as she wants to live it." She paused to ask, nonchalantly: "Do you admire the new woman, Andrew?"

He was reluctant to be drawn into the abstract, but rallied to the appeal. "Yes, and no. I expect she's an improvement on—well, on the—"

"Goody-goods?" Agatha helped him.

He looked at her, startled, but she was regarding him gravely, and he agreed. "Yes. In some respects she's improved. She doesn't faint and weep; she's learned to take her medicine like a man. She has the courage of her convictions."

"Do," pressed Agatha, "have some more tea. Men admire courage in women, don't you—they?"

"Why, yes, because it's rare, I suppose. At least I never thought women had much courage until—"

"She's not afraid of—er—being unconventional any more, is she?"

"Good Heaven!" he laughed. "That's her long suit. All women are nonconformists these days."

"Nonconformists," Agatha repeated, delighted with the word. "That's it exactly. Now, just how would you define a nonconformist?"

"Why a person who declines to conform to set rules, any recognized creed."

She nodded her satisfaction. "You see, some of these modern expressions are new to me."

With that ponderous air of gravity upon her she reminded him of a docile child at school. He got out of his chair, and slid in beside her on the Chesterfield.

"That's one of the marvelous things about you. You're all the things that most women talk about wanting to be—without

even being able to talk their jargon. Agatha"—her nearness was too much for him—"you're everything I've always dreamed of finding in a woman, but I never thought my dream could come true." Where the delicate lace circled her throat he could see a pulse beating beneath the pink flesh. "Agatha, dear, don't you know I love you? I've loved you since the first moment I ever saw you! Agatha—"

XIV

He had her hands now, cold and quiescent in his, breathless hands. Her fragrance came to him, the essence of all beauty, all youth, all love. She was as still as her hands, save for that pulse beat in her childish throat. Her profile, cut against the shadowed old room, hurt him with its purity.

"Agatha, dear?"

"Yes, Andrew."

"Don't you know what I want you to say?"

"N-no," she whispered, and spoke the truth. There was only one thing of which she was certain now—he loved her. All the rest was confusion. But he loved her. And yet he thought—Did men marry the "new" women? Would he—

"I want you to say you love me, Agatha!" She was quiet under his encompassing arm, and he drew her closer. "Say you'll marry me, dear."

"Oh, Andrew!"

"I love you!"

It was Agatha Marley's first kiss. Somehow he knew it. For a long moment he cherished her there against his shoulder, brooding over her tenderly. "Agatha, you love me—say it—you *do*!"

She fought her way back to reality, drew gently away, and fixed her eyes on his tie. "You're sure you want me, Andrew—*sure!*"

"Sure! Oh, my darling—"

"No, Andrew, please!" She struggled free again. Doubts were at her like myriad gnats. "Andrew, I mean—you've heard what they're saying about me. But I'm *not*—"

"Everything I've heard has made me love you that much more. Darling, my own brave darling!"

She made a last effort. "Then, you're—you're glad about the baby!"

"Poor hungry little mother heart," he crooned. "Did it think I wouldn't under-

stand? I'm going to try not to be jealous any more."

She gave it up. Gave up also to his reaching arms—but only for an instant. Hattie knocked smartly on the door, opened it to announce:

"Here's Felix, Agatha. I'll bring another cup."

"Don't bother about the cup," Felix said, and strode in and laid a box on the nearest chair. He looked balefully at the awkwardly erect figure of Andrew Mason in a far corner of the Chesterfield.

"Sit down, Felix," Agatha invited from the opposite corner. "Of course you'll have tea."

Felix ambled to a chair in morose silence, and Andrew addressed him pleasantly: "Getting colder, isn't it?"

"Shouldn't be surprised," Felix concurred, and fixed him with eyes deep in malice.

Andrew, expansive, genial with his new found happiness, rose. "I think I'll run along, Agatha."

Her eyes, yearning to him, held him for a moment before they relinquished him. "Must you?"

"Better," he said. "Perhaps if I bring over those proofs to-night, you'll go over them with me."

"Of course!" She tried desperately not to be too eager. "Bring them by all means. I'll be glad to help."

His voice, booming joyfully to Hattie in the hall, came back to them. Agatha took a deep, tremulous breath, and turned to Felix.

"I thought maybe you'd like some candy," he said. His malice had gone with Andrew. Dejection weighted him down.

"How nice!" She took the box and gratefully busied herself with its wrappings. "Lovely! Oh, thank you, Hattie dear. Pull your chair up, Felix."

Felix, instead, looked at the tufted expanse of sofa beside her. He remembered Andrew, and resentment flooded him. When Hattie had left them he had a moment of indecision, and then he boldly took his place beside her. Agatha smiled dimly at him, and poured him tea. Joy, like muted bells, played within her.

"How are things with you, Felix?"

"All right, I guess." He had yet to solve the mystery of Agatha. Something—a remoteness into which she seemed to fold herself away from him—bad filled him with a

strange timidity. To-day he had whipped himself to belligerent determination. And to-day she was more lovely and more remote than ever. Yet, if what they said of her was true—and it must be, else why had she not denied it—“Look here, Agatha!” He set his untouched tea on the table and edged closer to her. “I had to see you to-day. I came up ‘specially to—I want to tell you—” He had it all carefully planned. He’d gone over it a hundred times. All these weeks he had wanted her, hungered for her with a hunger made rapacious by his jealousy of Andrew Mason. Oh, he knew what to say, all right, to a woman who— He edged still closer. Her eyes were on him, smiling faintly, misty with the memory of her first kiss, and he blurted:

“Agatha—oh, Lord, Agatha, I want you! I want you to marry me!”

She was no more surprised than he. But once the words were out he knew them for the truth, knew there was nothing else he could have said to Agatha Marley.

“Oh, Felix! Felix dear!” Gently she moved clear of his groping arm. “I’m so sorry! But I can’t, Felix—please—”

“Agatha, listen,” he was panting, “I mean it. I—I’m crazy about you. I want to marry you! I don’t care about—about anything! I don’t! I want you—anyway.” He mopped his face with a purple-bordered handkerchief. “Listen! You can’t go on like this. You know all the old hens in town are getting more and more riled up. They won’t let you alone. But if you marry me—don’t you see, Agatha?”

“Yes,” she confessed, “I see, Felix—what you mean.”

“If you marry me I’ll have the right to protect you. Listen, dear—I’ll be good to the little kid!”

A small, cold hand came to rest on his great, red paw. “Felix, you don’t know how much I like you for everything you’ve said. But I can’t marry you.”

“Why?” he demanded; and she could see that he was honestly puzzled.

“Because I don’t love you, Felix. I couldn’t marry you without that.”

“Yes, you could! Marry me anyway, Agatha! If you don’t—well, they—they’re going to hurt you. You can trust me not to do that. Marry me—”

“I wouldn’t use any man’s love just to protect me,” she said quietly.

In silence he yearned over her. “You might learn to love me, Agatha.” She shook her head sadly. He slumped forward, a terrible sense of confusion and futility upon him. Then he got to his feet, a tower of gloom—this, the waggish Felix, the *bon diable* of the village!

“Well, I’ll get along.” He shambled to the door, his eyes supplicating her. “Maybe you’ll change your mind.”

“No, Felix!”

“Maybe you will!” he persisted stubbornly, and went out.

XV

AGATHA sat where he had left her, pivot of a magnificently deranged world. She heard Hattie call a cheery farewell to the departing Felix, and waited in sublime assurance until the door swung inward and the ruddy face appeared in the aperture. Her glasses bridged the precise, pink part of her hair, and her eyes were darting interrogation points; but all she said was: “Well!”

Agatha released a long pent up breath slowly, ecstatically. “Oh, Hattie!”

“What did Felix Crane want? My land, I never saw him act so funny!”

“He wanted to ask me to marry him,” Agatha told her.

“My land! To ask”—she came slowly forward, soaking in this belated triumph at every pore—“to ask— Well, I could have sworn when he came to-day that something like that was on his mind. Why, lamby”—she was a little timid here; the misty glow in those eyes was misleading—“what—what did you say?”

“I said no. I’m going to—I’m going to marry Andrew!”

“Mr. Mason!”

“Andrew! Oh, Hattie—Hattie, he loves me! Yes!”

“So they both popped, did they?” trumpeted Hattie jubilantly, and took her darling to her bosom. Hattie’s bosom was a forbidding and an impregnable affair of steel and whalebone beneath a bulkhead of skin-tight alpaca. But Agatha’s cuddling head snuggled happily against it, and heard the big heart beneath laboring over its sudden inrush of joy. Her hand on the coiled amber of the girl’s head, she marvelled: “Deary lamb, you’re not crying! Good gracious!” She made an indignant pass at something warm and wet on her own nose. “Lamb, don’t cry!”

"Think of it, Hattie! He loves me!"

"Well, why shouldn't he?" she demanded, incredulous. "Of course he loves you! Any man would!"

Agatha gave her a mighty hug, fumbled for a handkerchief, and dabbed at her eyes and nose. Tears still hung on her lashes and cheeks, but joy sat her, a bedazzling garment.

"Hattie, he loves me!" She said it like a beatitude. "He thinks I'm beautiful—and brave—and wonderful!"

"Ha!" exulted Hattie, and began to speak very rapidly. "Now, lamb, listen! You're not going to feel bad, 'cause after all's said and done, the joke's on them. You see, I been keeping it away from you—what you didn't know wasn't going to hurt you, I figured, and you could 've proved it wasn't so any time you'd a mind to—for that matter, so could I. I've known where that paper was for the last two weeks." Agatha opened her lips to speak, but she hurried on, determined, belligerent, a warrior scenting battle, glorious battle. "What I said in the beginning—about those women thinking the baby was yours; well, they did. They do. Everybody does. It's all over town that you—"

"Oh, Hattie! You knew!"

"After I'd thought it over, I said to myself, well, let 'em think it! They been watching this house like hawks. Tickled me to death! But now that you're going to be married; now the time's come to tell 'em what fools they've been!"

"No, Hattie. No—we *can't* do that."

"You leave it to me, lovey! I know how you feel—everything coming so sudden like—"

"But you don't understand!" shouted Agatha. "It isn't sudden—at least *that* isn't sudden. I've known all along!"

"You've known!"

"Of course. How could I help it? Everybody knows!"

"But—but, deary, they can't—I mean Felix nor—"

"Of course Felix knew!"

"But you just told me he—he asked you to marry him! He didn't believe it then!"

"Of course he believed it, but he was willing to overlook it."

"Willing—"

"We're not going to do a single thing about it."

"But Agatha—stop to think! Suppose Mr. Mason—"

"He knows, too. That's why he loves me," Agatha explained simply.

XVI

WHEN Rose left Agatha, she trotted jauntily down the road. She was enormously pleased with herself. Rose had achieved that age where the young mind, if it happens to be an empirical and active young mind, is in a chronic state of revolt against all the established rubrics of life. Had she been a city product, this quite normal disorder would have found its antidote in the restless life about her. But Ellonvale's social activities were limited and restricted, and, as a result, Rose's radicalism was limited to oratory and a liberal use of rouge and powder. She was passionately grateful to Agatha for supplying a lay figure upon which she—and incidentally the league—could hang their theses.

Halfway home she passed a group of women, and guessed that the Ladies' Aid must have been meeting at her mother's house to-day. Voices still seeped from behind the closed door of the parlor when she went in: her mother's grave and sonorous alto; little Mrs. Doty's shrill soprano, and Cassie's excited tremolo. Rose flung her hat and coat on the hat-tree, and had started for the stairs when the door opened, and she heard Mrs. Doty's combative, "Well, ask her. Don't take my word for it! Ask her."

"Rose!" Her mother loomed an accusative figure in the doorway. "Just a moment. Have you been inside the Marley house since—since Agatha came home?"

Rose glared her malice at the expectant pair in the parlor. Her defiance was for them, rather than her mother. "Yes, I have."

Mrs. Doty coughed a gentle "I told you so" behind her hand. Cassie's eyes glistened happily. Mrs. Duncan echoed awfully, "You *have*!"

"Yes, I have. What's wrong in it?"

"When you knew what people were saying about—"

"Course I knew. How could I help it? I'm not a baby, mother!" She shot a venomous glance at Cassie. "I don't think it's any worse for me than it is for Cassie True! She's not married—"

"I'm no child!" Cassie reminded her, very stately and dignified.

"You don't have to provide an affidavit to prove that," Rose snapped.

"When I was your age—" began the affronted dressmaker; but Rose sneered.

"Oh, don't try and pretend that you can remember as far back as that!"

"Rose!" chided her mother. "How dare you talk—"

"Well, they tattled! And it's none of their business. Besides, what harm is there in my going to see Agatha? Her complaint isn't catching; if it was, Cassie'd had it long ago, she's exposed herself enough—and she can't talk about anything else. She's a frustrated—"

"When we older women discuss these things," Mrs. Doty broke in severely, "we do so only from a sense of responsibility."

"Page Diogenes," murmured Rose wearily.

"While you are a young girl, who should have her mind on—on better and more decent things!" finished Mrs. Doty triumphantly, scathingly.

"Well, I have! Agatha Marley is decent! She's a lot more decent than a lot of sex-starved old maids who'd love to do just what she's done, but are too scared," blurted Rose, seeing an opportunity of killing two plump birds with one stone. "I'm eighteen, and I've made a study of these things, and if people knew more about the natural functions of life from a scientific standpoint, they'd be a lot better off." She regaled herself with one delighted glance at the three horrified faces, and flung herself dramatically from the room. "I guess that 'll hold 'em for awhile," she thought as she panted up the stairs.

It did. Mrs. Duncan clutched frenziedly at her shattered composure, and was the first to speak. "I don't know what the young people of to-day are coming to," she said, unconsciously plagiarizing her own mother.

"Well," Mrs. Doty gloated gustily, "if that doesn't show what an evil influence will do, I'd like to know what does!"

Mrs. Duncan, who knew Rose's heresies to antedate Agatha's return, agreed vaguely: "I suppose it does."

"I know I'd seen her coming out of there," Cassie told them.

"I think it's high time something was done—and done quick!" Mrs. Doty declared. "I told Henry only last night 'it's a terrible thing to expose a decent community to—'"

"I don't see what harm she can do, though," advanced Cassie, whose imagina-

tion had fed itself plump on that indecorous association.

"One evil influence can corrupt an entire community," Mrs. Duncan reminded her sternly.

"You heard Rose," accused Mrs. Doty.

"Y-yes; but I've heard her talk pretty much that way before—" Cassie began, and was frowned silent by Rose's mother.

"Of course," Mrs. Doty said. "Henry keeps on saying that it's none of our business; but—"

"There are some things," Mrs. Duncan took her up, "that we have to *make* our business. If Agatha Marley can't see how we feel; if she's too callous to know that she's being snubbed—"

"I don't see how she *can* know it," Cassie interrupted with suspicious innocence. "Goodness knows we've paid more attention to her since she's come home than we ever did before."

"How did we *know* at first?" demanded Mrs. Doty, injured. "I didn't want to judge anybody before I was sure."

"She's taken no trouble to conceal it," Mrs. Duncan said grimly.

"Looks to me as though she wanted to flaunt it," Mrs. Doty told them, "the way she dresses now. And I'll bet not a day passes but that Mr. Mason or Felix Crane doesn't go there."

"You should have seen," Cassie recalled dreamily, "the basket of candied fruit that came the other day when I—I happened to drop in. Mr. Mason had ordered it from New York; and there was a box of chocolates that big on the table."

"Just boldly flaunting—"

"She gave me some of both to take home."

"She acts absolutely unashamed."

"I don't believe she *is* ashamed," ruminated Cassie.

"The way she acts," reasoned Mrs. Doty, "is enough to give out the impression that sin pays."

"Well, some books I've read," Cassie confessed, "say that it's the way you look at a thing that makes it wrong or right. Now maybe Agatha—"

"Something," Mrs. Duncan said firmly, "has got to be done."

"I'd certainly like to speak my mind to her!" And if Mrs. Doty's eyes were the windows of her mind, Agatha was to hear some very bright things indeed.

Cassie, seeing the lovely glamour fade

from her colorless horizon, said hopefully: "I don't see what we can do;" and drifted off on a sea of conjecture.

"Oh, there are things we can do!"

"A person can't break the moral code without paying the price," Mrs. Duncan intoned solemnly.

XVII

CASSIE came back from her little voyage with an idea. "Well, she's not the only one who's broke the moral code, and she hadn't ought to be the only one to pay!" They looked at her sharply, and saw that her thin cheeks were burning red. "The man's just as much to blame!"

"The man!" bleated Mrs. Doty. "What man!"

"The—the father of—of her child," stammered Cassie bravely.

"My land!"

"The father's none of our affair," Mrs. Duncan said, "and besides—"

"He is!" persisted Cassie, who had taken time to read an occasional book, revel in an occasional movie, despite her sartorial duties. "And he's as much our affair as Agatha is, and it's not right to punish her and let him go free."

Mrs. Duncan couldn't afford to admit that she had overlooked anything; so she said gravely: "He's none of our affair because he isn't corrupting Ellonvale."

"Besides, how do we know—"

"Well, I know!" proclaimed Cassie dramatically. "At least—of course I couldn't swear to it, but I'd be willing to bet almost anything that it's Felix Crane."

She couldn't have hoped for a better effect. They stared at her in gaping astonishment that gave slow quarter to horror.

"Felix!"

"Felix Crane!"

Cassie, expanding under the inspiration and the sudden glare of spotlight, advised them grandly: "Well, figure it out for yourselves. He can't be a New York man—unless it's somebody who's been here. You know how old that baby is, and how long she's been away." There was a moment of absorbed mental calculation. "It's got to be somebody around here, because Agatha never went away until after her father died. Well! She never had any beaux, and that last year when the professor wasn't well he didn't have any company to speak of. But Felix went there all the time—taking prescriptions and things."

"My stars!" breathed Mrs. Doty. "My land!" Mrs. Duncan, finding no suitable words, nodded dazedly.

"Well, he began taking trips to New York right after Agatha went there, didn't he?" Cassie demanded with growing arrogance. "And look at the way he's been acting ever since she came back! And I suppose you didn't think anything about it when she said she was thinking of calling the baby 'Felice'!"

Neither had Cassie, but that was beside the point.

Mrs. Duncan said, from the depths of a trance: "Felix—Felice!"

"What's more," elaborated the glorified Cassie, "and this is what really made me suspect him—he's been raging jealous of that Mr. Mason. Raging! And he's crazy about Agatha—dead crazy!"

"He certainly has acted that way," conceded Mrs. Doty breathlessly.

"And now listen to what he said to me, just yesterday. It was on Elm Street—I was on my way to Blooms's for some sixty white for that white dress I'm making for Sarah Acker—and I met him. I knew right off he was on his way to Agatha's; dressed to kill, he was. Well, I stopped to pass the time of day—he didn't want to be stopped, you may be sure of that—and I sort of twitted him about going up there so much, never thinking a thing serious right then, you know, and—"

"Well, what did he say?" demanded Mrs. Doty, whose endurance was rapidly waning.

"Well, we talked for a minute. I said something about how pretty Agatha looked these days, and how he seemed to be taking more notice of her than he used to, and what do you think he said!" She paused to take a foretaste of triumph from those two attentive faces. "He said he didn't notice that she was any prettier than she used to be, and that they'd always been good friends! He said he guessed Ellonvale had to have a brickbat fall on it before it could see anything! And then he went off—huffy as anything!"

With a sort of brisk little skirmish not unlike a bow she stopped and exultantly returned their stares. Mrs. Duncan took a deep, incredulous breath, but Mrs. Doty, whose mind had grown nimbler as her figure grew heavier, inquired scathingly: "Well, if he liked her as much as all that, why didn't he marry her?"

For a moment this extinguished Cassie, then she rallied valiantly: "I don't think Agatha wanted to marry him."

"Then why'd she have the baby?"

"Well," reasoned Cassie, with the superior air of one well versed in the matter, "there's no accounting for the yearning of the mother heart. They say the maternal instinct's stronger in some women than others."

"They didn't call it that when I was a girl," Mrs. Doty said witheringly.

"And we all know," continued Cassie, ignoring this irrelevance, "that it must be strong in Agatha. The way she took care of her father proves that. Well, as I see it, she wanted a baby, and *didn't* want a husband."

"Of all the shameful—"

"If that's so, and Felix Crane is the father of that child," declared Mrs. Duncan, thoroughly roused, "they'll get married or leave this town!"

"That sounds something like!" approved Mrs. Doty heartily.

"That's what I thought," Cassie confessed—"that maybe we could make them get married."

"But if she doesn't want to marry him—" Mrs. Doty began; but Mrs. Duncan cried grimly:

"If she's got the right kind of maternal instinct, she'll want to give that baby an honest name!"

Mrs. Doty brought them down to sober fact with an unpleasant thump: "How we going to do it?"

Mrs. Duncan considered it while they waited breathlessly: "The thing to do is to put the question right up to Agatha herself—to appeal to her in the name of her dead father." Her stern face rosied with magnanimity. "She ought to think of his good name as much as her baby's. I believe if I were to go—let her see I have only her interest at heart—"

"I think," announced Mrs. Doty firmly, "that she'd be much more likely to listen if a—a committee went to see her. A committee would make it look more dignified."

Cassie fervently subscribed to this. "If a committee went—say we three—it would look less sort of personal."

Mrs. Duncan succumbed, not too warmly. "And the sooner the better," she decided. "How about going over there early this evening, right after supper?"

In the adjoining sitting room, separated

from the parlor by a pillared arch, a pot-bellied stove bloomed crimson. Above the pot-bellied stove a register had been cut into the ceiling to admit the heat to the room above. That room was Rose Duncan's, and that register, as Rose could have testified, had been known to transmit other things quite as warming and much more diverting than heat. To-day, for example, Rose had resented the heat; it had uncomfortably tickled the scalp beneath her shorn locks, and all but burned her listening ear. She had, however, remained valorously at her post, and when the hour for the rendezvous was set she leaped soundlessly to her feet and tiptoed down the back stairs. From a nail on the cellar door she resurrected a defunct coat and hat, and, once out of range of the parlor windows, fled across the fields toward the Marley house.

XVIII

WHEN there was no response to the blows she rained upon the sturdy panels of the back door, Rose plunged boldly inside, fortified by the importance of her mission. She scurried through the deserted kitchen and into the hall, and called shrilly: "Agatha! Agatha! Where are you?" Then she saw that the library door was open, and made for it.

Agatha and Hattie were standing facing each other, the cleared tea table between them. Hattie had the look of one fighting off a hovering nightmare; and Agatha was saying slowly and firmly: "I tell you he knows, and loves me for it!" Then she saw Rose, pendent there in the doorway. "Why, Rose!"

Hattie cried sharply: "My land, Rose! It's a wonder—"

"I knocked, but you didn't hear; and I'm in a devil of a rush!" Her voice was rasped with running. "Listen, Agatha! They're hot on your trail! They've decided to attack!"

"What in the world—" began Hattie; but Rose caught her breath and swept on:

"They've decided you're a bad influence. They're coming over to-night to appeal to your better nature. I listened. I thought I'd better tell you so you could be prepared."

"But I don't understand! Who's coming—what—"

"The uplifters. Mother, the irrepressible Doty"—she checked them off on her fingers—"Cassie True. They'll be along after

supper. I don't know whether they'll bring a rope or not."

"They're coming here!" Agatha said, still bewildered. "But what for?"

"To make you an honest woman," Rose explained shortly. "You see, they were chewing you over again, and I got gay and took your part. That gave 'em a chance to say that you'd corrupted me."

Light broke on Hattie's befuddled brain. "So they say that, do they? They're coming here, are they? Well, let 'em come!"

"That's the spirit, old horse!" applauded Rose; and, earnestly, to Agatha: "Give 'em the best you've got, Agatha. It 'll serve 'em right; besides, it's time they snapped out of their Rip Van Winkle." She moved toward the door. "It's a marvelous chance to do something for the cause; I wish to gosh I could stand by, but I can't. If mother finds me gone—" With that sinister possibility at her heels, she turned and fled; then reappeared in the doorway to add: "I'll try to sneak over later. Don't let 'em down too easy!"

Agatha stood looking at the place from which those nimble legs had vanished for a moment before she brought her gaze back to Hattie. Hattie was swelling vainly, like a rooster getting ready to crow. She said ecstatically: "The nerve of those women! They've got the face to come here!"

"What are we going to do, Hattie? I never dreamed they'd—"

"Do!" gloated Hattie. "Do! You needn't do anything. You leave 'em to me! If they don't feel like thirty cents before I'm through with 'em!" She saw them, abashed and humiliated, and the vision was reflected in her glittering eyes and in her plump cheeks that shone like polished apples. "It couldn't 've happened better. We'll let 'em say their say, and then when they hear the truth—when they see that orphan asylum paper—"

"Oh, but we can't tell them the truth!" Agatha cried.

Hattie protested impatiently: "Don't talk silly, Agatha!"

"It's not silly. I've just told you—"

"If those women," Hattie declared beligerently, "come up here lookin' for trouble, they're going to get it!"

"But we're not going to tell them the truth. We can't. If we do, Andrew's bound to hear of it, and that mustn't happen—ever!"

Hattie took a tenacious grip of her tem-

per. "All this talk about Andrew Mason's believing that truck is nonsense. If you think that any man in his right mind is going to fall in love with a girl who—"

"That's why he fell in love with me," Agatha broke in passionately. "He believes the baby's mine—and he loves me for it. It may sound queer to you, but that's because you don't understand that times have changed. Men don't feel the way they used to about these things. They believe a woman has a right to live her own life as—as fully as a man. Nowadays they judge women by modern standards; and the modern woman has courage. We didn't realize these things, being buried out here with father."

"Why, Agatha Marley, you talk like a—like a—"

"I'm talking like the new woman," Agatha said. She was shaking with the effort to formulate and transcribe her own vague impressions. "That's what Andrew thinks I am. I tried to tell him the truth, but I couldn't—I wouldn't! I'm never going to tell him. I love him. I'm going to be what he wants me to be!"

"And you're trying to tell me that he wants you to be a—a—"

"Yes," nimbly she forestalled the word, "but they don't think of it as sordid any more. The maternal instinct is recognized now as the ruling influence in life. If women have—have babies, people don't think any the less of them if—they take their medicine like men!"

"Men," shouted Hattie, desperately, "don't have 'em!"

"The world has changed, Hattie. I didn't realize it until just lately. At first when I knew what people were thinking, I thought it was terrible—and thrilling. I wanted them to think it! Nobody had ever thought about me before, and it was wonderful! I used to say to myself: 'Now they've got their heads together talking about me!' It was glorious! I knew I never went out that some one didn't say: 'There goes Agatha Marley!'"

"My land!" weakly from Hattie.

"I thought I was getting back at—at life for cheating me! I thought I was acting the part of a very wicked woman, but I wasn't! I was just acting normal and modern. Women aren't wicked any more just because they're unconventional." Her vehemence had fired her like a gusty bellows. Hattie looked at the slim, tensed figure in

its gray sheath, at the flaming cheeks and eyes, in astonishment. "Don't you understand, Hattie?"

"N-no," Hattie managed. "All I understand is that you're a changed girl."

"I'm not, Hattie. I'm just the same—inside. I wish I were changed. I'd feel more honest. But it's just through pretending that I've learned all these things. You see, they thought I was changed, too; so they treated me like a human being instead of father's shadow—I mean Felix and Rose and Andrew did."

"Why, Andrew Mason never knew you before!"

"No! And do you suppose he'd have loved me if he had? He's a man of the world. Don't you see now why I've got to keep on pretending?"

"What I think, Agatha," Hattie announced grimly, "is that you've lost your senses."

"No, I've found them at last," declared Agatha devoutly.

"And if those women come to-night—"

"I don't care!"

"You're going to as much as admit that what they think's true!"

"I don't care about them. They can think what they like!"

Hattie took a long breath that shook her sturdy frame. "Well, let me tell you right now that I won't be a party to this nonsense any longer. If you're crazy, I'm not. I'll tell 'em—"

"Hattie, you wouldn't!"

"Oh, wouldn't I? If you don't tell 'em the truth, I will! I know where that orphan asylum paper is!"

Agatha's arms shot out. She clutched the housekeeper's shoulders in a frenzy of entreaty. "Hattie dear, you wouldn't! You wouldn't spoil my happiness like that—and that's what you'll be doing! Andrew always thought women were weak and cowardly before he met me. He's loved me from the first because he thought I was brave, and I've got to keep on letting him think so because—because I love him!"

Hattie, giddy with bewilderment and anger, shook herself free, and padded resolutely for the door. "Of all the talk! I never would've dreamed! You wait, young lady!"

"You won't tell them!" wailed Agatha. She felt the scarlet cloak slipping, and herself slipping with it, back into the gray obscurity from which it had lifted her. The

thought of life without that inspiring garment was insufferable. She had almost come to think of herself with her past rooted in scarlet lawlessness, threaded bright with intrigue and adventure. She knew now that it was this that had lent her the courage to win Andrew! Without it she was lost. Without it she must lose Andrew! Suddenly she knotted her small fists and shrilly apostrophized the empty doorway: "You'll *not* tell them! You'll *not*!"

XIX

It was close upon eight that evening when Mrs. Doty's stubby forefinger found the doorbell and loosed the challenge on the silent old Marley house. Hattie opened to them, war in her darting, scornful eyes and in the plant of her feet as she trundled them into the library. They walked single file, stepping softly without speaking, like mourners at a funeral. Mrs. Duncan led the contingent; Mrs. Doty trotted stanchly behind her. Cassie minced, palpitant, in the rear.

In the library Mrs. Duncan folded her gloved hands across her broad, flat stomach, looked from the cheerful blaze in the deep old fireplace to the nude "Venus" who had supplanted the professor, and from the "Venus" to the gay chintz at the windows, and announced solemnly: "We'd like to have a word with Agatha, if you please, Hattie."

Hattie, in turn, appraised the unwelcome callers with a thoroughness that started a contagion of jerks and twitches among them, before she replied: "You wait here! I'll see if she's in."

In the hall she looked up and saw Agatha at the top of the stairs. They had not spoken since that fiery parting some two hours before. Agatha had bathed and bedded the baby in silence. Her untouched dinner, served and covered, was shriveling in the oven. She had evidently heard the bell, and now she came slowly down the stairs, and with her stepped a rallying group of lovely, gallant ladies who had risked their all for their loves.

She had cast off the demure gray. Over a simple tunic of soft and lustrous blue she had slipped a mandarin coat of the same hue, but emblazoned with dashing scrawls of copper, incarnadine, and beryl. She came slowly, regally down the stairs, and Hattie saw that this exotic raiment, this outer symbol of her revolt, had been re-

enforced by a filmy thatch of powder that overlay the small nose and scarlet cheeks.

When she reached the bottom step, she posed there, one hand on the newel post, while she asked: "They've come?"

"Yes," said Hattie, and their eyes locked in challenge. Hattie's, dull with rankling anger, wavered first. "Don't be silly now, Agatha! Just tell 'em that baby's not yours, and then kick 'em out."

"If Andrew comes while they're here," Agatha said quietly, "ask him to wait in the sitting room—will you?" And she went, breathing fast, into the library, and closed the door behind her. She had formulated no brief of rebuttal. Necessity had lent her courage. Now, facing her inquisitors, it supplied her with something else—the torch which Rose had carried.

There was a sound from the waiting three like wind in the grass when they saw her. To Agatha it was the whisper of curtains rising on a darkened auditorium. She moved toward them graciously. "Good evening, Mrs. Duncan! I haven't seen you in some time, Mrs. Doty! And Cassie, too! How is Sarah Acker's dress coming along?" She distributed impartial smiles of welcome, and motioned them to chairs. "Will you sit down?"

Mrs. Duncan shifted her weight uneasily. Mrs. Doty coughed. Cassie sidled to a chair, sat down, and fumbled with the collar of her coat. Mrs. Duncan, spokesman, ordinarily a ready speaker, struggled to recapture her club president manner. She managed: "Why, I don't think—we shall not stay long, thank you. The fact of the matter is—"

"But do sit down, won't you?" pressed Agatha, and sank gracefully into a corner of the Chesterfield.

Mrs. Duncan compromised by selecting the extreme edge of the chair closest at hand.

Mrs. Doty followed suit. She announced nervously: "I can't stay long. I don't like to leave the children—Henry being out."

"I thought you said old Mis' McPherson was minding them," Cassie reminded her.

"She is. But I sort of like to be there to overlook things."

"That," Cassie countered dryly, "is like keeping a dog and barking yourself, I'd say."

"The fact is, Agatha," intoned Mrs. Duncan, frowning at these intimacies, "that we've come here as a committee to—"

night, on a—well, a rather delicate mission."

"Indeed!" sympathized Agatha.

"Goodness knows"—Mrs. Doty's disapproving eyes were on the mandarin coat—"it isn't of our own choice!"

"No? Then whose?" Agatha, politely interested, wanted to know.

"We've come"—Mrs. Duncan took up her speech where she had left off—"because, as old residents of Ellonvale, and as grateful admirers of your father, we thought it our duty—"

"Don't think, Agatha," advised Cassie eagerly, "that we want to make it unpleasant for you, because—"

"No thought was farther from my mind, Cassie," Agatha assured her warmly.

"Agatha knows," Mrs. Duncan said, looking severely at the little dressmaker, "or she should know, that we have her own best interests at heart." She broke off to impale Agatha with an accusative eye. "I suppose you have already guessed the object of this visit."

Agatha said, widening her eyes and smiling gently upon them: "Why, I didn't suppose you had any other object than just to pay me a neighborly call!"

"Now Agatha," remonstrated Mrs. Doty impatiently, "you know perfectly well why we're here! You must know what people are—"

"One moment, Mrs. Doty, please!" This was violating all known precepts for committees and committee meetings, as Mrs. Duncan very well knew. "You must realize, Agatha, that there are some individual acts that—er—have a derogatory effect upon a—an entire community. You must also realize that we all—as individuals—owe a certain debt to society!"

"Indeed I do!" concurred Agatha heartily.

This wasn't the cue Mrs. Duncan had expected, but she went on with her speech anyway. "If we could live our lives alone, if we owed no such debt to society—we would be free to act as we pleased."

"That's quite true," Agatha said.

"Well, then," Mrs. Duncan resumed, a little arduously under that mild gray gaze, "you must know, though you pretend you don't, that your actions since your return from New York have given rise to very—er—very grave suspicions!"

"She knows perfectly well," broke in Mrs. Doty, whose nerves had worn brittle

under this preamble, "that nobody in El-lonvale believes she got that baby from an orphan asylum!"

"Oh!" exhaled Agatha.

On the whole, Mrs. Duncan was relieved. She sighed, and said, "In short, the general impression in this community is that the child is your own!"

"Oh!" repeated Agatha softly, tremulously. "Oh!"

The room was charged now—electrified. Goose flesh prickled Cassie's spine. Mrs. Doty crowed shrilly: "Well, is that all you've got to say?"

"You've done nothing, Agatha, to—dissipate that impression. You've made no effort to deny it! In short—"

"Why," Agatha asked quietly, "should I deny it?" and rolled her crumpled handkerchief between her wet palms; and drew courage from the silken caress of the mandarin coat and the illicit scent of imported perfume with which she had touched her throat and ear lobes.

"Why should—"

"In the first place, I fail to see that I owe you an explanation for anything I do. In the second, I have done nothing that needs an explanation."

Mrs. Doty marveled harshly. "Why, you'd think she was proud of it!"

XX

SOME atavistic spirit of the theater stirred within Agatha as her eyes touched one after the other of those three avid, fascinated, incredulous faces. There was not an inch in her taut body that was without its own separate pulse, for she was athrob from her temples to the soles of her feet. Even so, she knew a heady, reckless joy as she leaned forward and pinned Mrs. Doty's shocked gaze.

"Proud!" she echoed dramatically. "And if I am, isn't it natural that I should be, Mrs. Doty? Aren't *you* proud of being a mother?"

"Me! You needn't go comparing—"

"Oh, Agatha!" moaned Cassie, in ecstacy.

"Isn't motherhood," demanded Agatha, "something to be proud of? You spoke just now, Mrs. Duncan, of our duty to society. Isn't maternity a woman's primary duty to society—to the race?"

There was a disconcerting abruptness in the question, and Mrs. Duncan floundered wretchedly before she got out, "I suppose

it is, but under these circumstances—a woman who's not married—"

"And what has marriage to do with the—the maternal instinct?" demanded Agatha, drawing eagerly, triumphantly, not only on Rose Duncan's rhetoric, but on her memory of Rose's haughty intolerance as well. "Does nature remain idle until a woman acquires a marriage certificate?" There was an abortive sound from Cassie, which sounded like a decided negative. "The maternal instinct," Agatha declared boldly, "has nothing to do with— with man made laws. Every woman is a potential mother, and yet every woman cannot be a wife." She was standing now, a blue flame, one hand on the Chesterfield to hold her steady, the other aloft for purposes of punctuation. "Why, in this State alone there are three women to every man. Those are the statistics!"

"That's true!" piped Cassie ruefully, resentfully. "I've read it."

"Of course it's true," Agatha said, plunging fervidly about among her new miscellany of knowledge. "And because it's true, you would have two women out of three go starved and—and barren through life, denied the most precious privilege of her sex!"

"Well, of all the—" began Mrs. Doty; and Mrs. Duncan made a guttural sound in her throat, but Agatha rapidly plunged on, unheeding.

"But they are no longer willing to do that! They are rebelling against the bonds of man made laws, even as the Chinese women rebelled against the barbaric custom that crippled their feet! Maternity is the sacred right of all women!"

"Sacred! *You* can say—"

"The modern woman," Agatha flung at her, tapping another faucet of knowledge, "is no longer afraid of—of anything, Mrs. Doty. She is brave. What *you* call sin, she looks upon as an achievement. She has emancipated herself!"

"Well!" Mrs. Duncan found her voice—rather, some one's else voice—and rose. "This isn't what we expected to hear from you, Agatha!"

"Of all the shameful—"

"No," Agatha countered grandly, "you expected me to weep—you expected repentance, because your minds are Old Testament minds, unenlightened—"

The door flung open. Hattie bounced in. Hattie, heaving, scarlet. "Agatha

Marley, are you *mad*?" And, to the women, "Are you fools enough to sit there and swallow all this nonsense? Don't you know that baby's not hers. Where's your common sense?"

"Hattie!" reproved Agatha sharply.

"Not hers! Why, she's admitted—"

"You're bigger idiots than I thought you were. It's a foundling, like she told you it was that first day! Don't I know? Didn't I see the paper?" She whirled on Agatha. "You hid it! Where is it? Where's that paper?"

"What," asked Agatha quietly, "do you mean, Hattie?"

"You know what I mean! Where's that orphan asylum paper?"

Mrs. Doty cried shrilly, "I know you can't take a baby out of an asylum without their giving you a sort of record. I had a cousin once who—"

"You hid it!" reiterated Hattie frenziedly. "Where is it?"

"I asked you," Agatha said, her hands clenched fiercely, "not to interfere. I don't know what—what you're talking about, Hattie. I know nothing of any paper!"

For an instant it plunged the room into a transport of silence. Then Hattie, with a yearning little cry of reproach, stalked blindly from the room. They heard her padding swiftly up the stairs, and Mrs. Duncan turned to her satellites.

"I don't believe there is any need for us to remain here longer."

A plaintive mew of protest issued from Cassie. "Oh, but we haven't said anything about—"

"We've said enough—and heard enough," Mrs. Duncan declared, and started for the door.

But there were unplumbed possibilities for thrills that Cassie had not yet sounded. "But, Agatha," she cried, "all those things you said may be true—I guess they are, all right"—this with a reminiscent sigh—"but if a girl *can* marry, then it's her duty, isn't it? I mean—you have to think about the baby. And if *he's* willing, then we thought you ought to be, too."

Agatha, her borrowed torch guttering, looked nervously at the outthrust face of the dressmaker. "What are you talking about, Cassie?"

"Why, the father. The father of your child. I've said right along it wasn't fair to punish you and let him go free. It was

my idea to find him and make him marry you!" She swelled a little at that, imperious to the dawning bewilderment in Agatha's face. "Everybody knows he likes you. I'm sure he'll marry you; he just almost said as much to me when I talked to him about—"

"W—who do you—who—do—"

"Why, Felix. We all know it's Felix. He's the next thing to admitted it; besides, we suspected it right along."

Agatha fell back from them, her face washed white with horror. "You mean—you think Felix—Felix—"

"You must think we're blind as well as dumb," Mrs. Doty sneered.

"We came here to-night," Mrs. Duncan said, thinking better of her determination to go, now that Cassie had usurped the chair, "to appeal to you for the child's sake."

Mrs. Doty edged in with, "Yes, with all your talk about the maternal instinct—and—and—"

"Hoping that you would think enough of it to give it an honest name. But since hearing you talk," she sucked in a shocked breath, "I don't believe you are interested in marriage at all!"

"No, no—I'm not!" She was fighting hysteria now. "You're quite right! I'm not interested—at least where Felix is concerned, not in the slightest!"

"You—you admit that too, do you?" Mrs. Duncan took a step toward her, loomed over her, ominous, threatening. "Well, let me tell you, young woman. You may think you can talk like this, carry on like this, but I give you fair warning! We may not be able to do anything legal, but if you expect to stay on in Ellonvale you'll marry him or you'll find things so unpleasant that you'll *have* to go!"

"You don't deny that he's the father?" probed Mrs. Doty avidly. "You don't deny it!"

"But I *do*! Of course I do! How dared you think—"

"Well, I don't believe it!" Mrs. Doty said savagely. "Of course it's Felix! If it isn't Felix, who is it?"

"Yes," urged Mrs. Duncan, with a virulence that sent Agatha shrinking back against the bookshelves, "if Felix isn't the father of that baby, then who is? Tell us that!"

A vivid, exotic drift of color, piled against the tiers of musty books, she faced them.

"But I can't," she gasped. "I can't—I don't know!"

XXI

It was while the committee was still in the clutch of the paralytic shock induced by this damning confession that Agatha saw Andrew Mason standing in the doorway. Looming there, tall and silent, in the shadowed hall, there was a rigidity about him, something in his white face and staring eyes, that made him seem oddly like a shadow himself. She saw him first with joyous relief, and then with fear. For the mention of Felix Crane's name had been the final, fatal blast on her borrowed torch of courage. It was out—quite out. That accusation had made her rôle too real, implied too much. Yet here was Andrew, who thought her so brave, for whom she had been brave, for whom she must continue to be brave.

Her chin lifted with the thought. She couldn't guess how long he had been standing there, how much he had heard. "Why, Andrew! Hello there! Come in!" Her voice floated over to him, airy, blithe.

The women turned, saw him as a fresh affront against the outraged virtue of the town, this man walking in with the informality of an habitué.

He came forward slowly, stiffly. "I rang, but no one answered, and—"

"Hattie's upstairs. I suppose she didn't hear," Agatha told him easily. "Come along in; my callers are just going!"

"Yes, we're going!" Mrs. Duncan's face was gray. Her eyes blazed an arc between the two heinous figures. "Heaven knows this house is no place for decent people. But if there's a law—"

"There is!" piped Mrs. Doty. "We can prove she's not a fit person to bring up her child!" All the Andrew Masons in the world could not stop that flow of unleashed rage. "If you"—she whirled on him—"have any respect for your good name—"

"If he had, would he be here?" rasped Mrs. Duncan.

"Just a minute," said Andrew, his voice strange and harsh. "I don't think you understand what you're saying!" But it was clear that there was something Andrew did not understand either.

"Oh, don't we!" snorted Mrs. Doty. "Don't we, though? I guess it's you who don't understand!"

"You're mistaken there," came crisply

from the glowing figure against the bookshelves. "Mr. Mason understands perfectly! He has no more patience with the Old Testament mind than I have." Proudly she lifted her eyes to Andrew's. "He doesn't expect the modern woman to subscribe to your set rules and formulas!"

"Oh, he doesn't," Mrs. Duncan hissed. "Well, if he thinks we'll stand for these kind of goings-on in Ellonvale—"

"We've stood more now than we should have. If we'd had any idea things were as bad as—"

"Agatha"—it was Andrew, still speaking in that strained tight voice—"don't you think—don't you think you had better tell these ladies that—that the baby is not yours?"

"Not hers! Why—why, she has just admitted—"

But Agatha's voice rose, clear and confident: "Would you have me stoop to that, Andrew? I'm not the first pioneer who has had to suffer for her cause. I can bear it, Andrew—now that I know how you feel!"

They saw him reach out a hand and clutch at the back of a chair as though for support. "But—but, Agatha! You don't mean—"

"I have the courage of my convictions," trilled Agatha. "But I can't expect *them* to understand why I decline to conform to—to their narrow rules and creeds!" Watching her, all but paralyzed, he had the odd hallucination of having lived through this very scene before. Even the words fell into their allotted place in a familiar formula. "Since the beginning of time," she was proclaiming musically, "the pioneer has had to suffer from calumny and criticism, but I can take my medicine—"

The rest of it was eclipsed by a resounding tattoo on the panels of the front door. Agatha took a dazed step forward when the three women, banked in the doorway of the library, fell apart, and Rose Duncan crashed through that human barricade. She plunged across the room to where Agatha had paused uncertainly, faced her, and cried:

"You fraud! You—you cheat! You—you impostor!"

Mrs. Duncan protested loudly: "Rose! What are you—"

"Here's Miss Marley, if you want to see her!" announced Rose over her shoulder to a strange young woman hovering near the door. "Here she is! Look at her!" She

whirled back to threaten that shrinking figure. With her spindling legs astride, her outthrust chin, her voice squeaking with fury, she was like an enraged mosquito. "Here she is, the—the lying little hussy! You're a disgrace to your sex, Agatha Marley—that's what you are!"

Agatha was looking beyond her at the startled face she had last seen, whitecapped and serene, in a New York orphanage—the face of the woman who, some three months before, had placed the baby and the baby's bottle in her arms. And as she looked, all the lovely, erring ladies deserted her, stepped back into the shadows from which she had invoked them.

"Pretending that baby was hers," shrieked Rose, "when all the time it was a foundling she'd got in an orphan asylum!"

There was a faint medley of sound from the committee; incredulity was in it, and humiliation, and defeat.

"Not hers!" trebled Mrs. Doty.

"Not hers!" Mrs. Duncan echoed hoarsely.

Cassie wailed bitterly: "Not hers!"

"Of course not!" scoffed Rose, and withered the immobile Agatha.

"But how do you know?" demanded Cassie with a judicial cunning born of her disappointment.

"Ask her!" Rose countered, and indicated the puzzled young woman in the doorway. "I drove down with Art to meet the seven fifty, and she was on it. She asked Art to drive her up here, and of course she gave the whole thing away. She's come to take it back to its own mother!"

XXII

UPSTAIRS Hattie had been blindly cramming her effects into her trunk. It was here that Rose's tempestuous outburst had reached her. With a glad cry she reached for her discarded apron, and charged down the stairs and into the library where the strange young woman was saying timidly:

"I wrote yesterday—I thought—didn't you receive my letter, Miss Marley?"

"Yes, oh, yes." It was Andrew, an unsteady tremolo of relief in his voice. "I happen to know, because it was I who brought it up from the post office. You see, you've just happened to stumble in on a little surprise party Miss Marley was giving these ladies."

"Ha!" crowed Hattie, triumph sweeping away her injuries. "I guess it was a surprise party, all right!"

"But Miss Marley will be free to see you at once," Andrew assured the stranger pleasantly. "The party was about to disperse when you came."

"Oh, we'll disperse, all right!" Rose snapped.

Andrew said quickly: "Will you show the ladies out, Hattie, please?"

"Will I!"

As she herded them rapturously into the hall, above the labored breathing and whisper of skirts, Cassie's plaintive whine drifted back to them: "We might 've known it wasn't hers!"

Agatha's brooding gaze of defeat was fixed on the forgotten letter lying on the small table where she had left it that afternoon. As though from a great distance she heard Andrew's exultant, chiding voice addressing her:

"You naughty, shameless darling!" She felt her cold hands taken into custody. "To devil those poor creatures! Do you know, my darling—for a moment I was almost fooled myself!"

She looked up at him. Her head was swimming, her world rocking; indeed there were several rocking worlds each at variance with the other. Andrew—eyes and hands holding warmly to hers—was suddenly the only stable thing in an utterly deranged universe.

"You were almost fooled! Then, you didn't believe—you mean you don't care if I—if I haven't the courage of—"

Hattie, returning—a cat surfeited with canary—saw that they had forgotten the strange young woman, and grasped her gently by the shoulders.

"You come along with me. I know you'd like a cup of tea."

"Courage!" Andrew echoed jubilantly. "I should think it took as much courage to mother a hypothetical baby as a real one any day!"

Hattie, happily propelling the strange young woman toward the kitchen, heard him, and said grimly: "Hypo— Well, if it was that kind of a baby, it's just as well you're going to take it away!"

Agatha sighed, and relaxed to her lover's beseeching eyes and arms, relinquishing the scarlet cloak, too perilous a garment by far to become the prevailing mode.